NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

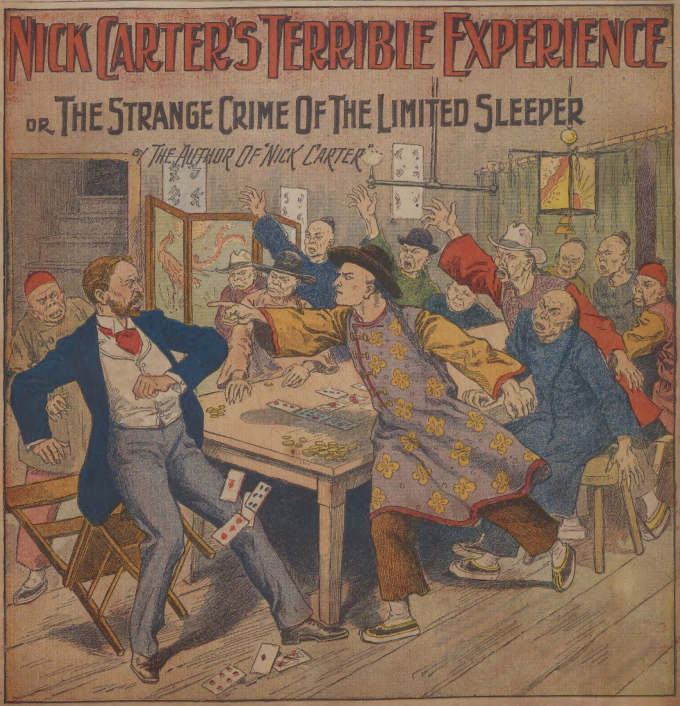
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered at Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 474 NEW YORK, JANUARY 27, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

NICK CARTER'S TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE

OR, THE STRANGE CRIME OF THE LIMITED SLEEPER

By THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



"Friends, these men are cheating!" said Nick in admirable Cantonese, pointing from Stanhope to the dealer.

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Nick Carter's Terrible Experience;

OR,

The Strange Crime of the Limited Sleeper.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE SLEEPING-CAR MYSTERY.

The telephone-bell pealed out its call, and Nick Carter picked up the receiver, and held it to his ear.

"Hello," he said, expecting to hear a voice calling his name, but by one of those strange combinations of circumstances, he found himself listening to a remarkable conversation, the wires having evidently been crossed.

"It's all right."

"Good thing."

"You jest bet it is. Not a hitch."

"Well, you're a bully one."

"Of course we're not out of the woods yet, but I think things are certainly coming our way."

"What next?"

"I can't tell you over this wire, but meet me to-night at twelve sharp."

"Where?"

"The old place, 'Knocker' Mike's, you know."

"All right. Sure the fly cops won't get wise?"

"You can bet your last V that they won't. I never did so slick a job."

"All right, all right, until I see you to-night."

"Oh, Jerry, I say, bring Grace with you."

"Perhaps she won't come."

"Tell her I said she was to, and she will, and, Jerry——"

But here the listening detective failed to catch any more of the conversation, and, after a moment, he hung up the receiver, and, turning to his assistant Chick, he asked:

"Chick, who is 'Knocker' Mike?"

Chick put down his paper, and smiled as he answered:

"Don't you remember him, Nick? He was the fence in that diamond case of ours for the Golding firm. They said he received the whole haul, but turned State's evi-

dence, and so his pals, who are now doing their time at Sing Sing, called him the 'Knocker.'"

"Oh, yes, Mike Callahan?"

"Exactly," Chick returned.

"Chick, that memory of yours is your best possession. Do you ever forget anything?" Nick asked, looking affectionately at his assistant.

Before Chick could answer, however, the bell once more claimed Nick's attention, and this time he heard a well-known voice:

"Hello, who is this?"

"Nick Carter," Nick replied.

"Good. Been trying to raise you for five minutes. What's the matter?"

"Wires crossed."

"I knew it was something. All right, now I have you. Nick, can you give me a little time?"

"I think I can," Nick replied, having recognized the voice of the chief of police.

"Very well. I want you at the station just as soon as you can get there."

"I fly," Nick said, with a light laugh.

"Oh, and I say, Nick, I want Chick, too. Is he anywhere about?"

"Seems to be occupying a chair beside me."

"Bring him with you."

"Very well, we'll start in a few minutes. Anything more, chief?"

"Lots, but I'll tell you when you get here, Nick."

With a "good-by," Nick turned away from the phone and said abruptly:

"Chick, you and I are wanted at the Central Station."

Instantly Chick arose, saying:

"I'm ready, Nick."

"So am I. This time we will go as ourselves. I don't believe there is any necessity for disguise," and as soon as the two could don hats and coats, they left the house, and, hailing a cab, were borne toward Forty-second Street.

"The chief gave no particulars?" Chick asked as they were whirled along.

"None, just said he wanted us."

"I say, Nick, they say a person is born every minute. I was figuring up the other day, and do you know that of the admitted crimes there are enough to average one every minute?" and Chick looked serious.

"Is that so" Nick asked, interested, as he always was in such matters.

"Yes, and when one realizes how few of the crimes are discovered after all, the aggregate is appalling."

"True. It is when I think such things, that I feel how glorious is our profession," Nick cried, with enthusiasm, and Chick nodded his head. These two had raised their profession to the highest notch, and were proud of it, and their ability to protect society.

The mind of each man was occupied, however, not only with the case they were possibly about to undertake, but with others in hand, for they were always busy. Some of their cases naturally took months, but they were never discouraged, but delved deeply into motives, and made wonderful deductions, which finally landed their men where they rightfully belonged, either behind the bars in the famous Sing Sing, or on the way to that dread place, the "chair."

Neither had said much, when they reached the uneasy chief, but both had been thinking, and their faces were unusually sober as they greeted the custodian of public morals quietly and a trifle absentmindedly, for Chick was arranging some data for the diary he kept of their cases, and Nick was still occupied with a new theory regarding a counterfeiting case they had on hand.

At the first words of the chief, however, both men became keenly alert, for he greeted them with:

"Hello, boys, I'm awfully glad to see you, for I think we have the crime of the century now."

"Explain," Nick said concisely, while Chick's eyes sparkled.

"I'd better show you. That will explain better than any words of mine," and the chief, motioning them to follow him, led the way to the yards, where stood a sleeping-car, with curtains all drawn.

Without a word, the chief drew a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and led the way within.

There was the stifling odor of a car occupied by a number of people overnight, combined with something else.

Still silent, the officer strode down the narrow aisle, and, drawing aside the curtains of a lower berth, pointed to what lay within.

Both Nick and Chick looked, and saw the figure of a woman, surrounded by gray hair, lying in a tense position, which was not that of slumber.

The eyes of the two detectives met, then Nick asked in a low tone:

"When was this discovered, chief?"

"About six. The porter brushed against the curtain, and, seeing the dead face, gave a yell. The aisle was filled in a moment with half-dressed people, but, fortunately, the conductor was a man of sense, and he ordered that everything be undisturbed. Trembling, the occupants of the other berths huddled together, talking, but not daring to interfere. As soon as they reached the station, I was sent for. I had the car switched off here, and sent for you."

Nick sat down in an adjoining section, and, with his eyes fixed upon the lifeless face, asked:

"What is the history?"

"During the night an elderly man came aboard, with a stretcher. He tenderly lifted some one from it, and carried her to this berth, already made up according to tele-

graphed orders. Placing her in the berth, he bent over the body, and appeared deeply touched. He was heard to murmur some broken words."

"Do you know what they were?"

"Both conductor and porter heard the tone, but cannot repeat the words."

"I see. Go on."

"This morning, when the body was discovered, of course every one looked for the old man, but he was gone."

"I see."

"Yet, Nick, he didn't get off at any station, and you know this is the limited, and no one could jump it without being killed."

"You say he didn't leave at any station at which the train stopped?"

"Yes. I have telegraphed, and received negative answers."

Nick nodded. All this time he was studying the dead face.

"Have you asked if a new passenger appeared in the smoker?" was Nick's next question.

The chief looked a little bewildered.

"No;" he returned slowly.

"I suppose it would be hard to tell. Of course, men come and go there, and any new face would not be especially noticed."

"What are you driving at, Nick?"

"Nothing more than that I believe that the old man was a young one, disguised. It would have been very easy for him to remove his false hair and beard; did he have a beard?"

"Yes, a long one, and snow-white."

"I thought so. Well, with that and his wig gone, even in the same clothes, no one would recognize him, and he could have come and gone without any special notice being taken of him."

Chick here broke in:

"Did the conductor take the names and addresses of all the passengers?" he asked.

"You bet he did. That man is very careful, and deserves a raise in salary."

"Wish he had detained them," Nick murmured.

"I have the names and addresses."

"True, chief, but all may not be correct."

Chick nodded his head.

"However, we will leave that for the moment," Nick continued. "Give us a little more light, chief," and he rose and bent over the cold form.

"Dead about eighteen hours," was his first observation."

The chief started.

"Then she was dead when brought on the car?"

"Without doubt."

"Horrible!"

"All crime is horrible," Chick said, in a low voice, joining Nick.

Once more the eyes of the two detectives met, and then Nick reached out his hand, and, laying it on the soft gray hair which lay like a mantle about the still form, gave it a jerk.

The chief started to remonstrate, then gazed open-eyed, for the firm hand of the detective wrenched hard, and from the head of the dead woman disappeared the gray hair, bringing into view short curls of pale gold, and looking closer, the officer saw instead of a woman of fifty, as he supposed, a young girl of barely eighteen.

"This is awful," he muttered, for he felt his heart ache as he saw the beauty of the girl.

"Have you received any notice of the disappearance of a girl?" Nick asked gravely.

The chief hesitated, then took from his breast pocket a memorandum book, and, opening it, read:

"Estelle Gardner, aged eighteen, of —— Fifth Avenue, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus Gardner, disappeared on the fourteenth of October."

"This is the twenty-fourth, ten days," Nick broke in.

"Height five foot two; slender, but very well built. Blue eyes, short, pale-gold hair, small hands and feet, has a gold bridge on left side of mouth, and a birthmark resembling a small bunch of grapes on her right arm, just below the shoulder."

As the chief read, Nick was gently looking for the distinguishing marks, and found them.

"It's Miss Gardner, all right," he said gravely.

"Disappeared on the day of the fourteenth, about five o'clock, and nothing has been seen of her since."

"When did you receive this?" Chick asked.

"On the sixteenth."

"Did you find any trace of her?"

"Not a sign, Nick."

"She is found now," Nick said gently, "and under terrible circumstances, but she shall be avenged. The man who planned this crime is a slick criminal, but no matter how skilful he may be, we'll get him sooner or later. These criminals always leave some trace behind."

"Apparently this one has not," the chief said decidedly.

Nick smiled grimly.

"That's where you are fooled, chief," he replied, "for he has," and Nick held up something, at which the chief gazed curiously.

"Not much," he muttered.

"And yet enough to trace him down," was the cool answer.

Once more Chick nodded.

"Well, Nick, you've done a good many things, but I must say that I cannot see how a few strands of black hair will do you much good," the chief replied.

"Chief, these hairs were in the hand of the murdered girl, and, if you look closely, you will see that they were

torn out. There are a dozen in number, enough to make a slight abrasion. However, that is not necessary. There are not two heads of hair alike in the world, nor have there ever been. Just as no two people have exactly the same features, so is the hair different."

"Do you expect to go about matching hair with every man you see?" the chief asked.

Nick smiled, as he answered cordially:

"Not exactly, but you'll admit that it will mean something if these hairs happen to exactly match those of a man I may suspect."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"The man who will benefit most by the death of this girl."

"And who is he?"

"I do not know as yet, but I soon will."

"I suppose you will," answered the chief, lost as usual in admiration of the keenness of the detective.

"Have you notified the coroner?"

"I sent for you first."

"Very well. Chick and I have seen all we want. If the parents of this young lady want us to take the matter up, we will do it gladly, for it makes my blood boil to see such a tragedy. If your men want this hair, they are welcome to it," and Nick held out the few strands he had taken from the dead girl's hand.

"Keep them, Nick. I am sure you will have to carry this thing to a finish, and even if they don't want you, I do."

"Very well, chief, you can reach one of us during the day," Nick returned, and he and Chick left the car.

While on their way home, Nick told Chick of the extraordinary conversation he had overheard that morning on the wire, and Chick asked:

"Do you make any connection between this crime and the one hinted at?"

"No, and yet stranger phases of criminal life have come before us, Chick," was the quiet answer.

"True," Chick returned, his mind going back to some of their wonderful experiences.

"Perhaps Patsy had better be on hand, anyway, and see. Such appointments ought to be watched on general principles."

"Oh, yes, though really no one of any account ever goes to the 'Knocker,'" Chick returned, running over in his mind all he knew about this famous fence.

"If we work upon the case, the first thing will be to discover who benefits by the death of this girl, and then what enemies she may have had."

"I'd like to go into it, Nick," Chick said slowly.

"Probably you will have a chance," Nick replied, and he was justified in his assertion, for they had just entered the house, when the telephone-bell rang, and Nick, answering, heard the chief's voice:

"Hello, Nick, that you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Mr. Gardner wants you to go right ahead. Says he will meet you at his home in an hour. Will you be there?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. I leave it all to you, Nick."

"You can."

"I know that, Nick," returned the chief, who always felt perfectly satisfied when Nick Carter was in charge of a case. As he hung up the receiver, Nick said to Chick:

"We're in it for fair, Chick," and Chick replied:

"I think this will be one of our great cases, Nick."

CHAPTER II.

NICK INTERVIEWS MRS. GARDNER.

It was a little before eleven when Nick Carter was admitted to the presence of Mrs. Gardner, and his kind heart was touched at the signs of grief on her still handsome face.

"Nicholas Carter?" she asked, glancing at the card Nick had sent in before him.

"Yes, madam."

"I think your name is familiar," she began hesitatingly.

"I am a detective," Nick said simply.

The face before him paled, then flushed, and Mrs. Gardner leaned forward eagerly:

"Do you bring me any news?" she asked.

Immediately, Nick comprehended that she was unaware of the dread tragedy, and he hated to be the one to break the news, but there is probably no one better fitted for such a task, for Nick Carter has many such experiences. However, knowing how necessary it was that he gain some information, and that she would be utterly prostrated by the news, Nick resolved to ask a few questions before speaking openly, so he said gently:

"I am here, Mrs. Gardner, to ask you a few questions relative to your daughter."

"Then you know nothing?" she persisted.

"We have some clues," Nick replied evasively.

"And you want to see if the person you have traced is she? I see," cried the afflicted mother. "Very well, ask me any questions you wish, and I will try and answer them correctly."

Knowing that she was going to be severely taxed, Nick insisted upon the lady changing her seat, and resting herself in a great leather-covered chair, while he seated himself before her on a straight-backed one, so that his face was in the shadow, and hers in the full glare of the morning sun. It is an old trick, but one Nick knew was a good one. Oftentimes he gained very valuable information by being able to read the face as well as listen to the voice.

"First, Mrs. Gardner, tell me about your daughter's disappearance," Nick began soothingly.

"She just disappeared, that's all. On the fourteenth, Saturday, she was very busy, preparing for a little lunch she planned to give on Monday. About four she came into my room, dressed for shopping, and told me she was going to go down-town to order a few things. I suggested the telephone, but she said she wanted to order them herself—pick them out. I understood she wanted some favors, or table ornaments, or something like that. I was tired, for I had been to a meeting of a charity association, of which I am president, and so I did not pay special attention."

"Excuse me, but was it her habit to tell you where she was going?"

"Yes. She never left the house without telling me just where she was going, and how long she was likely to be gone."

"Upon this occasion?"

"She said she would be back before six, and started out in the brougham."

"Started out?"

"Yes. When she reached Forty-second Street, she stopped at a store from which we often order table furnishings, and entered. A few moments later, she came out and dismissed the carriage, telling the coachman that she would not need him any longer."

"And did he not remonstrate?"

"He? Mr. Carter, he is a servant," replied the mother, with great dignity.

Nick smiled grimly, as he said:

"Still, madam, as a man he would know that it was not proper or safe for a young girl like that to be out alone after dark."

"My servants obey."

"Ah! madam, you have yet to learn what an important part servants play in the lives of their masters," Nick said sternly. "Where is that man?"

"Who?"

"The coachman."

"Oh, Wilkins. Why, he's still here."

"Will you summon him?"

"I cannot, since he is off for a few days. Day before yesterday, he brought me a telegram from his wife, who lives in another city, stating that their child was dying, and asking him to come to her."

Nick raised his head quickly, and asked:

"Where does this Mrs. Wilkins live?"

"Harrisburgh."

"And you allowed him to go?"

"Certainly."

"Kindly give me a description of this Wilkins," Nick continued, and Mrs. Gardner replied:

"He is a small man, a little too undersized for his position, but he is an excellent man with the horses, and my husband likes him."

"Was he alone on the carriage the day your daughter disappeared?"

"Yes, the footman was not well that day, nor had he been for some days."

"How is he now?"

"All right."

"Then the coachman reported to you that Miss Gardner had dismissed him as soon as he returned?"

"No, I was asleep when he came back, and only awoke in time to dress for dinner."

"When did you miss your daughter?"

"When she failed to appear for that meal. We had several friends with us, and I was annoyed."

"What did you do?"

"Summoned her maid. She reported that she had not seen Estelle since she left the house at four o'clock."

"Then what?"

"We called in the coachman, and he delivered his message."

"Then?"

"We sent him to the store where he had left her, but they could not even remember her having been there."

"One minute. Did they know her?"

"Yes, but the store is always crowded, and she might have been in there without their giving her any special attention unless she ordered something."

"Then I take it she did not leave an order."

"No, and yet I know she intended doing so."

"You did not communicate immediately with the police?"

"Of course not. We kept the matter to ourselves as long as we could, hoping against hope that she would return, but from that day to this, we have not heard a word," and the mother buried her face in her handkerchief.

"Mrs. Gardner, please pay attention to this question. Who is your daughter's most intimate friend?"

"That would be difficult to tell, for she has a number."

"Has she any particular friend of the opposite sex?"

"No. We have always intended that she marry Murray Stanhope, our nephew, or, rather, my husband's first wife's nephew. He has always been like a son to us."

"Can I see his picture?" Nick asked, still studying the portrait of a young man, which hung before him, upon which his eyes had been fixed for some moments.

"You will see it right in front of you."

"Thanks, is it a good likeness?"

"A very good one."

Nick had already noted the heavy black hair, worn quite long; the mustache and pointed beard, which sparsely covered the long, thin face; the fleshy, coarse lips; the prominent, transparent blue eyes, and the protruding forehead. In the sloping shoulders, the face in which the higher and lower natures strove for mastery, he read sure signs of a brilliant intellect, overshadowed

by baser passions, and resolved that this nephew would stand some investigation.

"You say Miss Gardner had no intimate friend, that is no one of whom she made a confidant?" Nick next asked.

"I can't say that exactly, but I am ashamed to say it, she seemed to like her maid better than any one else," confessed the mother.

"Indeed, and has the maid also taken a vacation?"

"Certainly not. Would you like to see her?"

"If you please."

Mrs. Gardner pressed the electric bell, and gave an order to the servant who appeared, which considerably startled Nick.

"Send Grace Payton here."

The man on the telephone had mentioned a "Grace."

During the interval which ensued, Nick gazed steadily at the handsome pictured face, and wondered, as he had so often before, how people could be so deceived by an outward pleasing appearance. So absorbed was he, that he did not hear any one enter the room, so was startled when some one asked in low voice:

"Do you want me, madam?"

Turning, he saw a tall, graceful girl, about twenty-nine, or thirty, with dark hair, and bright-black eyes. There was something familiar in the easy carriage of the handsome head; the long lines and rounded curves of the body, but he could not place the young woman, and, at last, decided that he was deceived by a resemblance to some one else.

"This gentleman wants to ask you some questions," Mrs. Gardner replied.

Nick smiled at the girl as she stood, perfectly self-possessed, before them, her hands thrust into the tiny pockets of her white apron, then he asked abruptly:

"How much do you know about Wilkins?"

The girl appeared a little curious, but answered promptly:

"Not much, sir. He says he's a married man with a wife, boy, and girl."

"Where do they live?"

"Harrisburgh, sir. He said that his wife had inherited a little home from her father."

"Did you ever see Mrs. Wilkins?"

"Once."

"When?"

"It was in the spring, wasn't it, ma'am?"

"I think it was," Mrs. Gardner replied coldly. She evidently was annoyed at having her servants' affairs discusssed before her.

"When did you see Miss Gardner for the last time?"

"Just before she left the house."

"Was it usual for her to go out this way?"

"No, sir. She just seemed determined to go."

"Did she receive any summons on the telephone?"

The girl hesitated for a moment, then answered quietly:

"I do not know. She was at the phone about three, but I do not know if she was called there, or went to raise some one."

"She was at the phone before she went out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know if she had any admirers?"

"A good many."

"Did she favor any?"

"No, sir, except Mr. Murray."

Nick's sharp eyes detected a slight tremble of the girl's lip, a peculiar expression in her eyes as she made this statement.

"And she favored him?"

"She was dead in love with him," was the quick reply, and the white eyelids drooped so Nick could not see the eyes, but he fancied that the peculiar expression had deepened.

"Grace," Mrs. Gardner said sharply.

"She was. Miss Estelle adored Mr. Murray."

"Use more respectful expressions when you speak of your mistress," Mrs. Gardner commanded.

"Well, that was right and proper," Nick suggested, "since she was to marry him."

"She'd rather have lost everything she had, than not to have done so," the maid replied.

"Would you mind changing the tone of your inquiries?" Mrs. Gardner said haughtily. "This young woman seems to forget her place."

The maid said nothing, but her bosom heaved, and Nick knew how the dark eyes must be flashing beneath the lowered lids.

"Then you can give me no real information relative to Miss Gardner's disappearance?" Nick asked, looking keenly at the girl.

"No, sir."

Nick turned from her to the mistress of this beautiful home, and said with an entire change of tone:

"Mrs. Gardner, I have something very painful to tell you. Summon all your fortitude."

"You know where my daughter is? Oh, take me to her."

"Mrs. Gardner, prepare yourself for a great blow," Nick continued, his deep voice infinitely tender. "Miss Estelle Gardner is no longer troubled by anything in this world."

"She is dead?"

"Yes, dead."

The unhappy mother stared wildly about her, then clutched Nick's arm.

"How did she die?"

"That is the terrible side to it. Death is not so awful when it comes quietly and naturally, but, my dear madam, your daughter was foully murdered."

Nick stood ready to catch the lady if she fell, but to

his surprise, the news only appeared to stun her. Like one in a trance, she sat, mumbling over and over again:

"Foully murdered."

The maid, white as death, clinging to the back of the chair he had occupied, for Nick was now standing, whispered hoarsely:

"How?"

"She was smothered as she slept."

Both women shuddered, then the maid asked once more:

"By whom?"

"That is for us to discover. Perhaps you had better call in Mrs. Gardner's physician, for I fear she will need him," then, as the girl left to obey him, Nick leaned over the suffering lady, and asked in a low tone:

"Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"If that girl asks to leave the house to-night allow her to do so."

"Do you suspect?"

"Nobody. I simply wish you to do as I say."

"All right," and a pair of tired old eyes closed.

Nick stood beside the stricken mother pitying her, and yet wondering that she had allowed a young life to grow up beside her, knowing so little of the inner self.

At last the mother asked:

"Will they bring her home?"

"Yes, as soon as the formalities have been complied with."

"Does Cyrus, my husband, know?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Probably with the body."

"How does he take it?"

Nick looked his sympathy.

"I cannot say, for I came on here, and left one of my assistants to call upon him."

"If I could only bear it for him," she cried, rousing herself. "I must not let myself be bowed down, for I have him to think of. Mr. Carter, I want you to keep working upon this case until you track down the guilty man, if it takes years, and all our fortune. My daughter has been murdered. Find the guilty man, for, until you do, I will know no peace of either mind or body."

"You do not need to urge me, madam," Nick replied gently. "If human skill can hunt him down, the man who took your daughter's life will be brought to justice."

"Thank you," she replied gently, then to the maid, who returned with her same quiet step:

"Grace, help me be strong to meet your master."

Grace glided to the woman's side, and took the outstretched hand in her own, holding it firmly and gently.

"We must prepare to receive the poor, dear girl. At last the woeful suspense is ended, but in how terrible a manner."

Nick stood by, watching the handsome face of the maid. There was something strange about it, and yet he could scarcely classify the expression.

"I will leave now, madam. If Wilkins returns, please advise me," and he added:

"You can reach me through the chief of police."

"Thanks. If you learn anything?"

"I will let you know. By the way, if Wilkins does not turn up, I'll have him sent for."

"I don't know his address, do you?" Mrs. Gardner asked the maid.

"No, madam."

"It makes no difference. The chief of that city can find him if he is in Harrisburgh. However, he may return, and, if he does, I want to see him."

"Very well."

"Oh, yes, by the way, what is the address of Murray Stanhope, whom you have mentioned?"

Mrs. Gardner gave an address, which Nick remembered, although his attention was riveted upon the face of the maid. She was white as death, and her hands trembled as she ministered to her mistress. That casual question had greatly excited her, of that there was no doubt.

As he left the house, Nick muttered to himself:

"Well, my fine young lady, unless I'm greatly mistaken, the late Estelle Gardner was not the only woman head over heels in love with this half saint, half demon of a chap, Murray Stanhope."

CHAPTER III.

THE YELLOW PERIL.

Nick was very thoughtful as he made his way home, for this strange case presented many baffling features, but he reserved his decision until he heard from Chick, who had been detailed to interview Mr. Gardner, and Patsy, who was to see the porter and conductor.

As he entered his study, Nick found the two young men waiting him, and he asked cheerily:

"What luck, boys?"

"So, so," Chick replied, and Nick, encouraging him with a smile, said:

"Let's have what you know."

"Mine is not much. I saw Mr. Gardner, and talked with him, although he was so stunned that he seemed in a daze. He said he could think of no one responsible for this murder. He stated that the girl was desperately in love with her cousin Murray Stanhope, to whom she was engaged."

"He said that, did he?"

"Yes."

"All right, go on."

"I asked if there might not be some other man in the case, but he declared not. He spoke about her disappearance, and was just plunged in grief. He says that she

knew no one in Harrisburgh, and that she was not a girl to go about alone."

"He said she was desperately in love with this Stanhope?"

"Yes. Spoke of it several times, and of his nephew's grief over her disappearance."

"I suppose he had no objection to the proposed marriage?"

"He was pleased with it. The man's a nephew of his first wife, and I think that marriage was one of love, the later one of convenience. I may be mistaken, but he evidently is very fond of this Murray."

"Your time was not lost, Chick," Nick said briefly, then turned to Patsy:

"Well, my boy?"

Patsy indulged in his characteristic grin as he replied:

"Oh, Nick, I say, when you want to put me up against the real thing in fear, send me to a darky porter!"

"Scared, was he?"

"Scared? Oh, my! Well, I just shook that out of him, and come to the bottom. The man with the body was tall, because he hit his head passing through the door. He was dressed in baggy clothing, and had a big white beard, which covered his face up to the eyes."

"When did the porter discover the body?"

"He seemed in a perfect muddle about that. It seems that one of the girl's hands was hanging over the edge of the berth, and he touched it, by accident, and the cold, clammy feel of it sent him off. The man's almost a wreck, his nerves are so unstrung."

"Then you are sure that there was no collusion between him and the man who brought the body on board?"

"Sure," and Patsy spoke with decision.

"And the conductor?"

"A right smart chap. Knew his business all through. No, Nick, both are straight as a string. He feels bad about it, and fears for the consequence, but otherwise is clear-headed. He says that the man seemed worried to death about the woman, whom he said was his wife, and sat on the edge of the berth until about ten-thirty, when he passed through the car to the gentlemen's dressing-room, saying he was going to turn in."

"Did the conductor see him after that?"

"He did not. Of course, he supposed that the man had gone to bed, but when he studied over the matter he decided that the fellow had passed him when he was not noticing, and climbed into the upper berth. When I told him our theory that the man was disguised, and had shed his beard and baggy clothes, he said it was very possible."

A knock on the door interrupted them, and Patsy, opening it, found Joseph with a telegram.

"For you, Nick," Patsy said, delivering the yellow missive.

Tearing open the envelope, Nick read:

"PHILADELPHIA, PA.

"NICK CARTER, New York.

"White beard and wig found just outside the city on track of Pennsylvania road. A mile farther, suit of clothing such as farmers wear, including hat. Am expressing same to you."

To this was signed the name of the chief of police of Altoona.

"That about establishes our theory," Nick said quietly, handing the telegram to Chick, who read it, with Patsy bending over his shoulder.

"I think, yes—now who was this tall man?" Patsy asked, excitement vibrating in his voice.

"Unless I am mistaken, it is Murray Stanhope," Nick replied gravely.

"But he was engaged to the girl," Patsy said.

"True, but there is that maid, Grace. She had some kind of a hold on Stanhope, or I'm mistaken. Who knows what motives may have driven him into the commission of this crime? Whatever they were, they were unworthy and cruel, and, if he is the guilty party, we'll bring the crime home to him, and have him punished to the fullest extent of the law."

Both assistants nodded.

"Now for our work. Chick, I want to know everything about this Murray Stanhope. Pat, you take up the coachman, Wilkins, and also the footman. I think I'll see to Grace Payton, the maid, who is so handsome a woman, and who displays so much hidden feeling when the betrothed of her mistress is mentioned," and then Nick gave the two assistants a brief outline of his call upon the Gardner household, so that they might be fully informed.

"How about 'Knocker' Mike?" Chick asked.

"I'll be there myself, I think. Of course, there may be nothing in it, but the man mentioning a crime, and connecting a Grace with it, has made me anxious to be present."

"Good thing, let me in, too," Patsy begged.

"Perhaps, I will," Nick laughed. "Now we'll get down to work," he added, and, within a few minutes, the wonderful office of Nick Carter was empty, and the three detectives were tracing down their quarry, like keen-scented bloodhounds.

As Nick left the building, he saw a man leave a lounging position in front of a house on the opposite side of the street, and start to follow him. This shadow was so clumsy that Nick decided that he was new at the business, and so played a little trick on him. After walking ahead very rapidly for a few minutes, he turned, and retraced his steps, coming upon the other so suddenly that there was no escape. To his astonishment, he found that the party following him was a Chinese, and that he knew him.

"See here, Ching Fu," he said sharply, grasping the Oriental by the arm, "I thought you'd have more gratitude."

Several years before, Nick Carter had saved this man from imprisonment, by proving that he was not guilty of a crime of which he had been accused.

The Celestial tried to grin, then, with his teeth chattering, he said lamely:

"I was not doing anything, Mr. Carter." He spoke excellent English.

"Don't lie that way," Nick said sternly, "or I'll see what effect the station-house will have upon you. You were shadowing me. Who put you next?"

"No one. Indeed, Mr. Carter, I was just walking along," began the man, when Nick interrupted.

"Of all ungrateful dogs," he exclaimed, "give me a Chinaman."

This touched the Oriental, as Nick intended it to, and he said earnestly:

"I'm not ungrateful, Mr. Carter, only very unfortunate."

"How so?" Nick asked, hailing a cab, and forcing his companion to enter it with him.

"Because I have been forced to act against you, my noble benefactor," and he made as elaborate a kowtow as the restricted space of the cab would permit.

"Cut that," Nick commanded, disgust in his voice.

"Well, but it is true."

"What's struck you, that you can no longer live as an honest man?" Nick asked angrily, for he was disgusted that this man, whom he had befriended so materially, should turn against him.

"The hand of mine enemy," was the sorrowful answer.

"I suppose so, but how?"

"Fan-tan," was the doleful answer.

Nick understood. This peculiar game becomes a passion with some Orientals. They cannot stay away from the table, and lose fortunes upon this king of chance games; so he asked:

"Well, and what of it?"

"I have lost great sums. I then borrowed, and still lost."

"Well?"

"He from whom I borrowed, who is a devil at the game, insisted that I pay part of my debt watching the illustrious Nick Carter."

"His name?"

"I know it not. He is called 'Him of the Keen Eye' in the fan-tan rooms, because he can tell better than we who have been playing all our lives, whether he has gained or lost."

Nick thought for a moment, then asked:

"What does he look like?"

"He is very tall, tall among tall men. Upon his head is much hair, also upon his lean face. His eyes start from his head. His nose is thick, and he has a cruel face. He might be a god, but he is only a devil."

"Murray Stanhope by all that's uncommon," Nick muttered.

The Oriental, with the fatalism of his race, had not tried to escape, but sat perfectly still, without an expression on his stolid face. So had Nick seen his countrymen face death in its worse form. He had seen them go quietly and unemotionally to that dread death where the body is cut into a thousand pieces. When the body is thus mutilated, the unhappy soul can receive no prayers from his descendants, and thus is condemned to wander alone outside the blessed land. It is the worst form of punishment, and yet they show no fear or dread in their faces.

"You know this fallen god?" Nick asked quietly.

"Just as I see him at the fan-tan rooms," was the gentle answer.

"You do not know his name?"

"I have spoken. He is known only as the 'Him of the Keen Eye.'"

"When do you see him again?"

"To-night at ten-thirty by your time."

"Where?"

"At the fan-tan rooms of Li Woo, in Mott Street," giving the number.

"If I am there, will you point him out to me?"

"I dare not."

"How much do you owe him?"

"Two thousand dollars gold."

"If I give you that amount, will you show him to me?"

The Oriental's head bowed low.

"Most illustrious," he said, deeply moved, "for that amount which would enable me to get out of this man's grasp, I would sell the bones of my ancestors."

"Very well, then, I'll be on hand, but, remember, that if you show me any treachery, I'll put you where there will be no chance for you to do anything more that's bad."

"I will remember," was the quiet answer.

"Very well. Now I think I'm done with you," Nick said abruptly, then asked another question:

"When were you told to follow me?"

"This morning."

"What time?"

The Oriental dug into the folds of his garments, and, extracting a Waterbury watch, said earnestly:

"Just three hours ago."

"Just about the time I left the depot," Nick muttered.

"Did his honor speak?" asked the watchful Chinese.

"No, but I will. How did this man reach you?"

"Came to my laundry."

"Oh, you still have it?"

"Yes, illustrious."

"I see. Well, in the future, you had better steer clear

of those fascinating beads, and keep from borrowing of devils. I'm going to set you down, for I think I have all I want from you," Nick said gravely, and committed the blunder of setting free a wary, keen Oriental, who was as crafty and subtle as Nick himself, and not hampered by any scruples of conscience, or fine principles of honor.

Opening the door, Nick said impressively:

"Remember, you have promised. I will be there on time, so look out for me."

With a low bow, the Oriental replied:

"I will remember, I will look out," then he turned and walked away, very rapidly for him.

Nick leaned back in his cab, thinking:

"Strange how things do dovetail into one another. I was certain that this Murray Stanhope was in some way connected with this case, and yet I never imagined that he had already discovered I was on. Well, I suppose I'll have to give him a little more trouble. Nick, you ought not to appear without some disguise," and, as his thoughts moved, so did his fingers, and with the curtains down, and his electric lamp lighted, he made a very astounding change in his appearance; so much of a one that the cab-driver stared in amazement when the sporty-looking young man descended from his cab, instead of his former fare.

"Forget it," Nick said pleasantly, tossing him a five, and the man resolved to hold his tongue, although he was not likely to forget this astounding occurrence. A man of handsome appearance, clothed as a gentleman, entered his cab. When he arrived at the address given, a much younger fellow with a mustache, and wearing entirely different garments, descended, and paid him a very large fee. No, he was not likely to forget, but he could be discreet.

Nick, in his new disguise, one Chick often assumed, walked away, intent upon the business in hand, and asking himself the question:

"What is the connection between Grace Payton and Murray Stanhope," so he did not see a pair of almond eyes intently watching him from the door of a shop, nor did he suspect that the man whom he had promised to aid was ahead of him, and once more spying upon him.

CHAPTER IV.

MURRAY STANHOPE.

Unconscious of any treachery, Nick Carter walked along, thinking very intently, until he once more gained the steps leading to the Gardner mansion, and then he stopped, and looked about him. Half-a-block away, he saw a small boy sauntering along, and Nick, walking toward him, beckoned.

The lad looked up, and Nick was sorry to see how unboyish the face was.

"Hello, want to make two bits?" he asked.

"Bet your life."

"Then take this to that house," pointing to the Gardner home, "and ask for Miss Grace Payton."

"Den wot?"

"Come back to me with the answer, and there will be another coin for you."

"How much?"

"Two bits again," Nick said, placing a quarter in the boy's willing palm.

"That's talk I like," returned the boy, running off with a card Nick had given him, upon which he had written:

"I come from one you know. Let me see you at once."

The card bore the name of "Mr. Kine Barker." Nick's appearance bore out the character suggested by such a name.

When the boy came back in a few minutes with a bit of white paper in his hand, Nick was not surprised, nor was he when he read:

"Come to the side door. I will be there. G. P."

"Bites easily," he muttered, giving the boy his promised money, and walking away briskly.

Nick Carter is a very keen, shrewd man, who keeps his senses about him, and is hard to fool, and yet he made two mistakes, the one following the other. The first was when he allowed the man, who had been following him, to go free, and the second, when he picked up this boy of ten idling about the street. Still he could not be blamed, for how was he to know that this neglected-appearing little fellow was the child of the maid to whom he had sent the card?

The boy eyed Nick with the great, unbelieving eyes of stunted, neglected childhood, and said with a grin:

"I s'pects dis is worth a bit or two from de ole man. He says: 'Tell me eberything, son,' en I does. Mam gettin' cards from fly cheap sports, well, I guess not, ef little Willie knows himself. I'll hang by the ole boy, and makes me report," and with a swagger, sad to see in such a child, the boy ran off, and, catching on a Broadway car, was carried down-town without expense.

In the meanwhile, Nick, following instructions, went to the side door, and, ringing, had the satisfaction of again seeing the handsome features of Grace Payton, as she opened the door.

"What do you want?" she asked uneasily.

"I come from 'The Man with Keen Eyes,'" Nick said, taking long chances.

The woman flushed deeply, then caught him by the arm.

"Come in," she said hurriedly; "although he ought not to have sent you just now. The body has been brought home, and I'm needed."

"He did for her this time, sure," Nick said confidently, with a tone of admiration in his voice.

"Hush!" the woman cried, glancing over her shoulder and putting something in her mouth.

Nick had noticed that gesture before. Half-a-dozen times he had seen Grace slip something in her mouth, and wondered at it. Now that he was at liberty to observe, he saw that she was eating laundry starch, and sighed to himself, for he knew that she was the victim of a habit almost as bad as that of opium-eating. The common laundry starch contains a certain amount of arsenic, and former experiences had taught Nick that a good many people eat it, thinking it will improve the figure and complexion. Others take it simply for the drug contained in it, and he believed that Grace Payton was one of the latter. Once the habit is formed, it is almost impossible to break it. Grace Payton was an arsenic fiend, and therefore any crime she might conceive would not astonish him.

"Oh, there's no danger; he's thrown off any suspicion, and the fly-cops will have a pretty search for the murderer."

"For God's sake, hush!" she cried, her fingers tightening about his wrist, as she drew him into a small room.

"Oh, I'm mum; I just wanted you to know I'm on."

The woman looked intently at him.

"How'd you know anything about it?" she asked, in a whisper.

"He's been drinking pretty heavy lately, and let something out," Nick replied, again taking a chance, but making a lucky guess that a man who would dare murder, and who was a frequenter of fan-tan rooms, must most likely be a drinker.

"And he promised me to keep perfectly sober," groaned the woman.

"It's just the same," Nick assured her, "for Kane Barker never did go back on a pal, and——"

His words were cut short by a cool, biting voice, which asked:

"Where are you, Grace? Your mistress wants you." And Nick, turning, faced some one, evidently the housekeeper.

"I'm here, Mrs. Jones," the maid returned very quietly. "Will you wait for me for a few moments?" she asked, turning to Nick.

"Sure thing," he replied, seating himself with awkward ease, and striking a match.

"I can smoke?" he asked, looking from one woman to the other.

"Yes," the housekeeper answered crisply, motioning the maid from the room and turning toward him.

Grace Payton went out noiselessly, her brilliant eyes glowing with the drug she was taking, as well as the light of exultation, and Mrs. Jones asked:

"What did you come here for at such a time?"

"What time?" Nick asked.

"A time of terrible sorrow," the housekeeper replied; and yet Nick could detect no great feeling in her voice.

"What do you mean?" he asked, blowing out great clouds of smoke, in accordance with his assumed character, and hoping that Mrs. Jones would not discover that he was smoking a twenty-five straight, something a man of his pretended character would never do.

"Our young lady, Miss Estelle, was murdered, and her body has just been brought home," the woman replied.

"Horrible," Nick said, stopping smoking, as though struck of a heap by the news.

"Yes; and yet I can't get up enough sorrow. She was such a disagreeable girl," the housekeeper said, seating herself. Evidently she had no desire to go out and face the sorrowing parents.

"Of course, her folks thought her perfect, but she was not. Of all disagreeable girls, she was the worst. I'll grant she was pretty enough, but she had not a pretty disposition, and the way she treated all the servants was something to see," and the housekeeper, who was a very worthy woman, as Nick could readily understand, sighed deeply.

"Proud?" he asked, resuming his cigar.

"Proud! Well, I should say yes, and that disagreeable. She'd sass her father and mother until I wanted to spank her. All of us folks were just so much dirt under her feet, and, as for Mr. Murray, well, she led him a dog's life."

"Who's Mr. Murray?"

"Her young man. She was to marry him next Christmas. He was the nephew of the first Mrs. Gardner, a dear, sweet lady. She died after they'd been married for only a year, and Mr. Gardner kept single for about ten years, then, as he was poor, he married this Mrs. Gardner, a real disagreeable sort of a woman, not a real lady."

"Looks down on you folks?" Nick asked.

"Indeed, she does, and she was only a poor girl—a stenographer—until her father made a lucky hit on Wall Street. He followed that by other lucky hits, until he became very rich, and then died, leaving her with a heap of money. Miss Estelle is their child. I don't think Mr. Gardner's heart ever left his first wife's grave."

"Not even when his daughter was born?"

"No, sir, not then."

"Why?"

"Because she's her mother all over again, or was, poor thing. Only she was worse."

"You didn't like her?"

"I hated her," the housekeeper said frankly, "and so did all the rest of us, she was so mean."

"You say she led her young man a life. How's that?"

"Why, she'd insist upon his doing all kinds of foolish things, and she was that jealous! You see, her mother's uncle, who had made money in Wall Street, at the same

time as her father, died, and left her a fortune of about a million. That made her awfully independent."

"Well, I should think so."

"Yes. It made her sass her folks worse than ever, and she was that mean to the servants, I wonder any of them stood it for a moment."

"Was she ugly to Grace Payton?" Nick asked, lighting his cigar, which, in his interest, he had allowed to go out.

"Indeed, she was, but I never could stand Grace Payton."

"Why?"

"She is above her place, and then, she has such a nasty habit."

"What's that?" Nick asked, although he knew.

"Eating starch. Isn't that disgusting? She eats it all the time."

"Funny." Nick replied, trying to place this peculiar maid, for he was sure he had seen her before.

"Of course it is. I told Mr. Murray about it, but he only laughed."

"Like him?" was Nick's next question, as he sat, his feet upon another chair, his face half hidden by the clouds of tobacco smoke.

"No, I don't, and I'm going to change, for I can't stand him ordering me about, the great, horrid brute."

Nick raised his eyebrows.

"Who brought this maid here?" he asked.

"Mr. Murray. I don't like everything I've seen, either," and the housekeeper raised her hands, encased in black silk mitts, a relic of bygone days.

"What have you seen?" Nick asked, tossing aside his first cigar and lighting another.

"Lots of things," with a toss of the head.

"Tell me."

"Not much! You're her friend."

"Am I?" Nick laughed, suddenly displaying his badge of office.

The woman had evidently been jealous of the power the maid had possessed over her late mistress and the household god, Mr. Murray, for she gave a little gasp of joy, and cried:

"Honestly, are you an officer?"

"That I am."

"What's your real name?"

"Nick Carter."

"Not the great Nick Carter?"

Nick smiled. "I expect I am," he said, in his natural tones.

"Thank God! Now this mystery will be cleared away," the housekeeper cried reverently.

"I hope so; now tell me all you know."

"It isn't much, except that Miss Estelle's old maid left about a year ago, and then this Grace Payton came. I didn't like her, from the first, for I could see she was above her position, and I don't like girls above their work. She never was friendly, but seemed to resent anything I said or did."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, she did, and I'm not used to that, for I'm the head of the servants, and I expect them to mind me."

"Of course."

"One day I came across her and Mr. Murray."

"Now you're talking."

"They were standing very close together, on the stairs, and she said, quick and short, like she was out of breath:

"'I won't stand it much longer, Murray, not for all the money in the world.'"

"What did he answer?"

"He looked at her as though he would kill her, and said, just as quick and short:

"'You'll wait until I'm ready. It is enough that you've been the curse of my life.'"

"What did she have to say to that?"

"She staggered a little, then said, in a very low tone:

"'Don't press me too hard, Murray, there may be murder in my heart to-night!'"

"Pretty bold words."

"Yes, indeed."

"Then what did he say?"

"He just looked at her a moment, and said, real clear and distinct:

"'You have been the bane of my life, but I'll remember your claims. Just keep patient. I have said my say. We'll have the money, but you must control yourself.'"

"How did she take that?"

"Pretty well."

"What did she do?"

"Suddenly threw her arms about his neck, and sobbed:

"'Never forget how I love you, Murray!'"

"And then?"

"He threw her aside, muttering, with a look on his face I would not like to be responsible for:

"'In the name of Heaven, be careful, Grace, or you'll ruin all!' and then she slunk aside, and ran upstairs, ramming her mouth full of starch, which she carries in her pocket."

"Women don't have pockets these days," Nick said carelessly.

"She has, just to carry her starch, I believe."

"What did you make of that interview?"

"I don't know."

"What do you think is the connection between Grace Payton and Murray Stanhope?"

"Again I don't know, but I'm sure it's something not at all nice."

"Then you did not love Miss Estelle?" Nick asked, changing his line of questioning.

"No, I did not."

"Were you sorry to hear of her death?"

The housekeeper hesitated a moment before replying, then said, flushing as she spoke:

"I can't say that I was. You see, when folks are always disagreeable, they don't make people love them."

"That's true."

"It is."

"What did you think when she ran off?"

"Ran off? That just expresses what I did think when she disappeared. I thought she had run off to marry her cousin."

"But her parents were willing?"

"Yes, but, if he asked her to go, she'd have gone, she loved him so."

"Then she really did love him?"

"Love him? She adored him. I never saw a girl so crazy after a man as she was after Murray Stanhope," the housekeeper said, her lip curling.

"Is he the kind of a man to inspire such a love?"

"He makes my flesh creep," was the quick answer.

"Thank you," came in level tones from behind Nick's chair, and, turning, he gazed into the face of the original of the portrait he had seen while interviewing Mrs. Gardner.

"I think, Mrs. Jones, you may go about your duties, and refrain from talking—gossiping, we might call it—with strangers."

The man's voice was low, but it lacked something, perhaps sincerity. Nick could scarcely tell, but when he heard it, he experienced a great desire to rise and clutch this master villain, as he believed him, by the throat.

However, he curbed his first impulse, and waited for the housekeeper to leave the room. This she did, trembling in every limb, and, when the door had closed behind her, the man turned to Nick, saying sarcastically:

"I am so happy to meet you, Nick Carter; and what can I do for you?"

"I don't understand you."

"Oh, yes, you do."

"No."

"Then I know you to be Nick Carter. What do you want to know, coming here to my uncle's house in disguise, and secretly pumping the servants?"

"I want to know who killed Estelle Gardner?"

"So do all of us."

"Why don't you tell them?"

The man's face turned fairly green, then it flushed deep-red, and he cried angrily:

"I imagined just about this, Nick Carter. Well, I want you to understand that you have met a man who knows what he's doing, and just how to do it."

"How nice!" sneered Nick.

"You may just bet it is!" continued the cold voice, and Nick felt annoyed at the lacking quality in it.

"Think you'll find out who killed my cousin?" was the next question.

"I have done so already," was the quick retort.

"Indeed, and who is the happy man?"

Nick smiled up into the cold eyes, but suddenly everything grew dark, for a blanket was skilfully dropped over him, and the sweet, pungent odor of chloroform filled the air. As one in a dream, he heard Murray Stanhope's voice saying, a long ways off:

"That's the thing; now cart him off, and put him where I told you. I rather think we'll have no further trouble with Nick Carter," and then Nick knew no more.

CHAPTER V.

IN A TIGHT PLACE.

When Nick awoke, he was in a strange place, his hands securely tied, his ankles ironed to staples in the wall, and a gag in his mouth.

"They have done it pretty well," he thought, but not for a moment did he give up hope. Nick Carter has been in too many tight places to become despondent.

"I say yes," broke upon his ears. They had trussed him up, like a fowl ready for roasting; they had stopped up his mouth, but they had not closed his ears, and so he heard plainly. It was Murray Stanhope who spoke.

"And I say no," broke in another voice, shriller and of a coarser timber.

"But, Wilkins, it's the only thing we can do," Murray continued, while Nick quivered with excitement as he heard the name Wilkins. It was the one borne by the missing coachman.

"Why do you object, you fool?"

"Because I do."

"Good reason!" sneered the man whom Nick had called the fallen god.

"Oh, I have plenty of good reasons back of me. There is no use to murder wholesale."

"Drop that word! I don't like it."

"Neither do I, my lad, neither do I, but that's what it is."

"Jerry, my boy, there are lots of unpleasant things in the world, and there's no use making them any more disagreeable by applying ugly names to them."

"Possibly not, but the law has given certain deeds regular names, and if we kill that detective, or remove him, as you want to call it, the law will say we murdered him, and then——" and he made a horrible clicking with his throat.

"But the law will never know. With Nick Carter dead, there will be no one to find out about this or the other."

"You forget his assistants."

"Without him, they are nothing."

"I don't know about that. I think they are pretty wi

guys. They couldn't live with Nick Carter as long as they have and not learn something."

The other man only sniffed, but he was evidently uneasy, for he began to pace back and forth.

By this time, Nick had decided that he was in a cellar somewheres, and that the men were in an adjoining room, separated from him by only a thin board partition.

As the effects of the drug passed away, Nick became conscious of a penetrating odor, and finally he recognized it.

"Opium," he decided, and then he felt sure he was in the vicinity of some opium joint, probably at the very number given him by the Oriental he had captured that morning.

"I wonder if he played me false?" Nick thought, resolving to teach the man such a lesson, once he was free, that he would never be tempted again.

"There is no other way out of it," Murray Stanhope's voice fell again on Nick's ears. "It is a very easy matter. There is an opening into the sewer in the next room. We have him gagged and tied. I'll unfasten him, and we will shoot him down, and no one will be the wiser."

The other man upset a chair, as he cried angrily:

"And I tell you I'll have nothing further to do with the matter. If you want to put your head farther into the noose, do it."

"Then you are willing to leave him loose, for him to play football with our lives?"

"No, I'm not."

"What do you propose?"

There was no answer for a few minutes, then the man called Wilkins gave a sharp cry, and spoke rapidly:

"The fan."

"What fan?"

"The automatic fan. It is in the attic. Don't you remember it? Back there is the opening through which all the air is sucked up the tube. If we lay his body in front of that awful suction, it will be mangled in a few minutes, and so mutilated that no one will recognize it."

"A good thing, but what do you call it not murder, eh?"

The other man said nothing, but, opening the door, entered the room in which Nick lay. The detective, realizing that he was playing a desperate game, resolved to appear unconscious, and so closed his eyes, and lay as though still under the influence of the drug.

With no gentle hands, the two tore off his clothing, and, tossing the garments aside, robed him in some reeking with the odor of opium. In an instant, he understood their sinister plan. When his body was discovered, if it ever were, it would be so soaked with opium that he would be taken for a regular habitué of the opium den above, and no particular questions be made about him.

It took considerable courage to lie perfectly motionless, and to control the movement of the eyelashes, but Nick had learned many things in his life, and one was perfect self-control, so his captors were utterly unaware that the man they were handling was conscious of every movement.

As they were working, Wilkins asked gruffly:

"Why did you send for me to come now, instead of midnight?"

"Because Nick Carter had butted in."

"Well, what of that?"

"He had been at the house, had seen Grace, and I thought I'd better tell you everything as soon as possible."

"And Grace?"

"Grace will stay right where she is for awhile; she's getting just a little too impatient."

"I believe, if it hadn't been for me, you'd have made way with Grace," Wilkins cried.

"No, but she's been the curse of my life."

"Drop that!" the other man cried.

"Eh?"

"Stop that talk about curses. I remember when my little sister Grace was just about the sweetest girl going, and then you came about!" and he snarled.

"Ancient history," Murray sneered.

"It's true history," retorted the other, and then they worked in silence, while Nick Carter made note of the fact that Wilkins, the coachman, and Grace Payton, the maid, were brother and sister.

"There, now I think our king detective is fixed for his last trip," Stanhope said, with a laugh which was scarcely human, and then the two men, with difficulty, for Nick was not a light burden, lifted the detective, and bore him away, through several rooms, to an opening, through which he could feel the fresh air.

In spite of his peril, the man preserved his self-control, and made no movement to indicate that he was conscious, and the fiends laid him in front of a peculiar opening in the wall. Up through this hole was drawn fresh air, to supply the little dens in which nightly some of the very best people in the city slept away honor, conscience, reputation, and life itself, wrapped in the terrible opium fumes.

The instant Nick was laid before this flue, he felt a powerful suction, and he was drawn up against the opening with a force which seemed to separate the flesh from his body. He appeared to be helpless, for both wrists and ankles were bound, and the gag was still in his mouth.

Without waiting to see how it affected him, the two men stole away, and Nick was left, bound and helpless, with every muscle quivering under the terrific pressure.

The door had barely closed behind the retreating figures,

however, before Nick made a brave fight for his life. Not only did he thoroughly understand the working of every muscle, but he had them under a wonderful control, and, in spite of the pain he was suffering, he managed to stiffen them sufficiently to withstand some of the suction, and at the same time to move slightly.

The movement was but a fraction of an inch, but he knew that, if he could but keep it up, in time he would be able to roll out of the radius of the fan, and escape.

Each time he was drawn toward the wall, he was weaker, but he persevered. The blood was very near the surface, and in several places burst through. He was a mass of bruises, but he did not allow himself to become discouraged, and labored on, panting, sobbing, and straining to get away from the deadly indraw of air.

For half-an-hour the unequal struggle went on. Nick suffering as few men are fated to suffer, and yet maintaining his self-possession, and not once failing to draw a little farther away each time he made the effort.

At last, however, he felt his strength leaving him. He had lost considerable blood, for his nose had been bleeding for some time, and his muscles were so strained that he could not exercise his customary control. Still, he knew that he must keep up, or his life was ended. Realizing that, he made a mighty effort, one which required all his strength, and then he felt himself falling, and, with a superhuman effort, he wrenched at the ropes which bound his wrists. The cruel cords cut into his flesh, but he persisted, and, just as he struck a cement pavement with a crash, he felt the ropes give way, and suddenly realized that he was free.

He must have lost consciousness for a few moments, but joy brought him back, and he sat up, only to feel the cruel pressure on his head. The mighty fan was still operating. Crouching, Nick looked up, and saw that the opening was several feet from the floor, and that there was a table under it, upon which he had been placed. This explained his fall.

With his hands free, it was but the work of several minutes to untie his ankles and take out the gag; but he was still a prisoner, unless he could manage to get through the hole in the outside wall. He had heard the men locking the doors as they passed through, and a hasty glance disclosed but one door to the little room.

Crawling to the opening, he examined it closely, keeping well out of the range of the suction. The bricks were loose, and the plaster old, and so, maimed, bruised, utterly exhausted as he was, Nick managed, brick by brick, to make an opening large enough for him to crawl through into the glorious air, free and alive.

He was a strange sight, as he staggered into the street, clad in pajamas, which shed an awful odor of opium; his face scratched and covered with blood; his head bare, and his hair rumpled beyond recognition, but, fortunately, he managed to get hold of a cab, and, tumbling in, muttered his address, and was borne toward his own home. Reaching it, he could scarcely get out and up the steps, and when Joseph opened the door, he was so startled at the pitiful sight his beloved master presented that he could only stand and stare, until Nick said, in a weak tone:

"Pay the cabman, Joseph, and then help me," when he was quick enough to catch the detective as he fell, and drag him inside.

Although he could scarcely bear to do it, Joseph stopped long enough to pay the wondering cabby, and then, closing the door, bent tenderly over the fallen form, and, forgetting bells and everything else, began to call for help.

In response, Patsy and Chick came tumbling downstairs, and both turned very white when they saw Nick lying there. The three bore him to his room, and, leaving Chick and Joseph to put Nick to bed, Patsy rushed off after a doctor, his heart in his mouth.

"Done up this time?" asked the doctor. "Well, I'm not surprised. The risks that man takes! One of these days he'll take the last."

"Shut up, can't you!" Patsy growled, trying to hide his emotion. With Nick gone, life appeared to have little in it for Patsy.

The physician smiled a little, but said nothing. He had attended all the detectives before, and knew of the great affection existing between them. When he reached Nick's bedside, however, he was very grave, and his replies were not at all satisfactory.

"How soon will he be about?" Patsy asked eagerly.

"Can't say," the doctor replied.

"Is it anything very serious?" Chick asked, trying to control himself as Nick would.

"Too soon to tell. Nick Carter has a wonderful constitution, but he is always overstraining himself. Wonder what he has been doing this time."

"Something heroic," Patsy replied eagerly.

"Of course," the physician replied, "but that doesn't explain all his injuries, you know. I'll be in about seven to-night."

"Can't you stay right here?" Chick asked.

"No use. He'll probably not rouse until then," and with that the physician left.

The doctor was not correct in his surmise, however, for within an hour Nick Carter opened his eyes, and looked about him. It was an instant before he recognized his own room, then he sat up in bed.

"Glory to gracious!" Patsy cried, and Chick, although speechless, looked his joy.

"So I'm safe at home?" Nick asked, unable for the moment to remember how he had reached there.

"You're home, all right, but we don't know whether you're safe," Chick said gravely.

"Nonsense, I'm safe enough," and Nick yawned, and tried to raise his arms, but the pain made even him wince.

"There, now, just see!" Patsy cried reproachfully.

"I see. Well, if I'm in for a rest of a day or two, you boys will have to get a hustle on you."

"Will you keep quiet, if we do?" Chick asked.

"You bet!" Nick said, with a sigh, as he lay back on his pillows, feeling as though he had suffered the tortures of the Inquisition.

"Then we'll do double duty," Patsy almost sang.

"All right," Nick smiled; "now for your reports."

"Oh, Nick!" both assistants cried.

"I will be better if I know everything is going along all right, for, boys, we're up against the slickest con man in 'little old New York.'"

"Murray Stanhope?"

"Just him, Chick; what do you know about him?"

"Not much. He's been running with Chinks lately. Put a pretty good sum in a cargo, run by Chinks, to smuggle in contraband goods to the Russians, and, as the boat was captured, lost considerable, probably about all his cash."

"Good. Anything else?"

"He has been doing a lot of fan-tan playing, and there is a story afloat that he is in with the dealer."

"That's pretty serious."

"It's apt to be, for you know what devils those Chinese are when they have been cheated. They don't forgive."

"That they don't!"

"He has kept people quiet by news of his coming marriage with his cousin; those to whom he owes money."

"Will this death affect his credit?"

"Probably; none knew of it when I saw them."

"Well, you have gathered in some pretty good news," Nick said pleasantly, then turned to Patsy:

"Old man, what's yours?"

"Wilkins has no wife nor children. He used to live at Harrisburgh, though, with a sister who had a little boy."

"Ho-ho! and what did the sister look like?"

"She is probably that maid, Grace Payton, to judge by description. At first, I thought she was 'Cheerful' Molly, from what I was told; but when I compared ages, I concluded that this girl is our old friend's daughter."

"Hold, Pat. 'Cheerful' Molly, sure enough! I wondered why Grace Payton's face was so familiar, when I was sure she had never come my way before. 'Cheerful' Molly, the arsenic fiend. That explains a good deal."

"What?"

"This girl eats arsenic, too."

"She does?" Chick cried.

"Yes; she is a starch-eater. You remember that whole family we captured, who about lived upon starch? Well, she's another. Fortunately, the habit is not a common one. This poor girl has inherited her mother's vice, or her inclination toward the drug," and Nick sighed; then he said, with a full return of his accustomed vigor in voice and manner:

"Now, boys, to get down to business."

"First, Nick, where have you been, and what has happened to you?" Chick asked eagerly as Patsy.

"Yes, perhaps that is the first thing to consider," and then Nick described his terrible experiences, and his devoted assistants held their breath in amazement and indignation.

The tension was very great, but Patsy broke it, as he usually did, by asking, in a voice which trembled in spite of himself:

"Oh, Nick, did that hair match?"

"As I was kept pretty busy hustling to keep my own hair on, Pat, I can't say for a certainty, but, from a casual glance, I would reply, yes," Nick answered, and then began giving instructions.

CHAPTER VI.

A PRECIOUS PAIR OF SCHEMERS.

The house was remarkably still, and yet a very important conversation was going on, the night of the day on which Nick Carter had met and conquered death.

In the room she had occupied as a bright, although haughty, girl, Estelle Gardner lay in the majestic solemnity of death, her white-robed figure covered with a profusion of flowers. Low lights were about, and over the dead body bent the sorrowing parents. Their grief was sincere and very deep. Even if the poor girl had possessed so unfortunate a disposition as to make few friends, to those who brought her into the world she was doubly dear, especially now that death had laid her low, and in so terrible a manner.

"Who could have hated our girl enough to have done this?" Cyrus Gardner had asked his wife many times, and she could only sob, and mutter:

"Who, indeed?"

The conversation was not between these two, bent low by their great sorrow, but between two others, one a handsome woman, whose right hand constantly stole to her mouth, and the other a man with a brush of black hair, and wide, staring blue eyes.

"Another?" the woman had asked despairingly.

"It was absolutely necessary."

"Why?"

"Why? You are silly. The man was Nick Carter. He hounded your mother into Sing Sing, where she died, so you ought to hate him."

"I suppose I should; but, Murray, I can't bear to think of murder."

"You were willing enough, with regard to Estelle," the man sneered.

"I was; but I hated her, and was never sure that I could keep you from her."

The man looked at her curiously.

"I wonder, sometimes, that I didn't make way with you," he said coldly.

"You need me," the woman replied, just as coldly.

"You never spoke a truer word, and there is something more—I can't help loving you more than anything else on earth."

The woman raised her eyes, and looked him straight in the face:

"Is that true?" she asked quietly.

"You know it is. From the first hour I met you, you have controlled me by a fascination I was powerless to resist. I married you because I could not live without you."

"And regretted it ever since?" she asked, with a rising inflection.

"No. I cannot help loving you, even when I am most cruel. With others, I am the heartless creature circumstances have made me, but with you I am as weak as a child, and, if I speak unkindly at times, it is only because I am overburdened with cares. It will be the happiest hour of my life when I can call you mine in the eyes of the world."

"But I am the curse of your life," she said, again putting her hand to her mouth.

"Forget all about those words. I may have said them, but I do not mean them," the man pleaded.

"Have you put in your claim yet?"

"No, but I am going to. First, I had to see you for a moment, my wife, and get some courage from you."

The woman looked at him closely before she answered:

"You often puzzle me, Murray. Away from me, you are brave enough, but just let you come into the radius of my influence, and you depend upon me like a baby on its mother."

At these words, the man frowned, and he spoke rather impatiently:

"I wish, Grace, that you would take better care of Tony. He's just running wild, and he might be almost anything, if he was looked after."

The woman's eyes drbpped, and she hesitated a moment before replying:

"Poor little chap," she said slowly; "but when we are rich, we can send him to a good school, and, smart as he is, he'll do us credit."

"Why do you neglect him now?"

"Foolish," the woman said lightly, "how can I do differently? Don't you neglect him, too, and yet he is your legitimate child, and as much like you as a son can be like his father?"

"True," murmured the man, drooping under her words; then he roused himself.

"Grace, do you know, I believe that you are the worst criminal of us two?"

"Nonsense."

"It's true. I never thought of crime until I met you."

"Then you think I suggested all this plot to you?" Grace asked, gravely munching a bit of starch.

"I know it."

"Well, and if I did, what then? It was the only way you could secure the fortune, and we needn't be bad enough."

"That we do. Kiss me, Grace."

The woman laughed unsteadily.

"You tried to push me away, the last time I tried to show any affection," she muttered.

"I won't this time. I was mad with anxiety that time," and he held out his arms. Looking nervously about her, the woman crept into his embrace, and stood for several minutes, clasped to his breast; then she struggled away.

"We must not take any chances, Murray, just now. Go up-stairs, and present your claim and proofs boldly. Do not retract, and do not yield in the slightest."

"All right," he said slowly.

"But, Murray, I don't want to hear anything more about fan-tan rooms," she continued.

"How did you hear that?" he asked, paling.

"I heard," she answered. "Now go," and, in spite of his entreaties, she would not allow any more love-making, but almost pushed the great figure from the room, which was her own private domain, and then sat down to meditate.

While she was thus engaged, Murray Stanhope slowly mounted the stairs leading to the room where his relatives held watch over the murdered body of their daughter. Cruel as he was, the man shivered. He lacked the courage to throw the bomb in his possession. Without the spurring influence of the woman from whom he had just parted, he never would have dared the deed in contemplation; but when he thought of her, he was encouraged, and dared anything.

With an evil smile on his lips, he thought:

"How this will floor them, the old fools! Grace is a wonderful woman, to have thought out every detail. Yes, but for her, my own wife, I would never have dreamed of such a crime," and then, with malice in his black heart, he knocked upon the door, behind which he knew his uncle and aunt were suffering untold agony.

"What is it?" came from within, in his uncle's voice.

"It is I, Murray."

"Come in, my boy," was the prompt response from the agonized father.

Murray Stanhope entered the room, although he felt his flesh thrill with horror.

As he crossed the threshold, he paused, and looked about him.

The heavy perfume of the flowers, the bowed figures of the mourners, hit him like a blow in the face, and he said hastily:

"I have something very important to say to you, but I cannot tell it to you here."

"Where do you wish to say it?" his aunt asked, raising a swollen face to his.

"In the library."

"Very well, we will go there," his uncle answered kindly, his heart bleeding for the young man, whom he believed bereft of everything that made life most dear.

"Yes, dear, we will come to any part of the house you prefer," his aunt said brokenly.

"What have you to tell us?" the uncle asked, when once they were seated in the library.

"Something I dislike very much to mention," Murray replied, his eyes on the floor.

"Is it bad news?"

"You may so consider it, uncle."

"Then let us know the worst, and that quickly, for we cannot bear much more," was the quick command from Mr. Gardner, while Mrs. Gardner shivered.

"I scarcely know how to begin," Murray Stanhope hesitated. The others felt a thrill of apprehension steal over them.

"Do not torture us," the aunt begged, her eyes filled with unshed tears.

"All right, I will not lose time. Uncle, aunt, I do not know how you can forgive me, but Estelle and I were married three months ago, and I am a widower, and almost broken-hearted at her loss," and the man bowed his head.

"You married? When, and where?"

"On the tenth of July, of this year, at the Episcopal church, on Broadway, called Grace Church," Murray replied, in a very low tone.

"Why did you do this?" asked his uncle, his voice trembling.

"Do not ask me, dear uncle. Estelle wished it so," Murray Stanhope replied.

The parents were silent. They knew of the mad love their daughter had borne this man, and how she was used to having her own wild way.

"It is very hard for me to make any explanation or to offer any excuse now," the man began, but he was interrupted by the father.

"I understand, Murray, my lad. You could not help yourself. However, can you explain her disappearance in any way, viewed by your knowledge of your marriage and the incidents connected with it?"

"No, uncle."

"Was she happy as your wife?"

"I think so."

"When did she propose revealing this marriage?"

"Upon the day set for her marriage."

"It was cruel."

"It was, and I have dreaded the time when you must know that I had been a party to the deceit," Murray answered, turning away his head, as though in deep grief.

"Murray," his aunt broke in, "did Estelle make a will?"

"I do not know," he replied quietly, although he did know full well.

"Yes, I wonder if she did?" the uncle chimed in.

"If she did, I know nothing of it."

"We must find out. As her husband, you are her natural heir, of course. Poor child, I wish she had trusted us, but she was always a strange child," and the bereaved father sighed deeply.

"Then you do not blame me, dear sir?" the younger man asked, his voice breaking, although he had considerable difficulty in keeping the triumph out of his eyes.

"Blame you, how could we?" came from both.

"I ought to have been stronger, to have protected her against herself," Murray continued, stretching out a hand to each, which was eagerly grasped.

"Few of us could withstand Estelle, once she set her heart on anything," was the gentle answer. "Anyway, it is a pleasure to have you for a son, dear boy," the uncle continued. "We have loved you as one, and now you are ours, in spite of death."

"Here are the papers," Murray said, withdrawing his hands, and taking several papers from his breast pocket.

"You were married without license?" the father questioned, after glancing at them.

"Yes, it was Estelle's wish."

"Without a license?" cried the mother.

"None is needed in this State. A marriage is legal and binding without one," Mr. Gardner said slowly; "still, I wish you had had one, Murray."

"I wanted one, but Estelle thought it better not," was his answer, and at it the parents were silenced, for none knew the imperious character of the dead girl better than they, who had suffered so much from it.

"Well, we will announce this marriage in the papers at once. The death notice has not been published, as yet. Call up the newspaper offices, and have this clause inserted:

"'Beloved wife of Murray Stanhope,' before that of 'Beloved daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus Gardner.' Murray, for we cannot have our world know the truth soon enough," but the elder man's lip trembled.

Murray Stanhope, seeing that quiver, caught hold of his uncle's hand, and said, with a deep grief, wholly feigned:

"You feel hurt at me, dear uncle, I know you do, and I do not blame you. I have hated myself for the part I have played—indeed, I have!"

"I cannot blame you, son. We all did just as Estelle wished. It does hurt to think she did not want us to know her happiness, but perhaps she loved you so she wanted to keep her joy to herself for a time."

"It was just about that," the man replied, keeping his lids over his eyes, for fear lest they betray him. His

mustache covered his mouth, but his eyes were the organs he had to guard.

"Very well, then; make the change I suggested, Murray. I want to take your aunt, and put her to bed. She is exhausted with all this trouble," and he glanced tenderly at the wife, who was leaning back, half unconscious of all that was passing, so plunged was she in grief.

"Poor auntie," Murray said, in a low tone.

"Yes, poor auntie, and poor all of us! We have suffered a great blow, and perhaps you most of all. We have lost our daughter, but you have had a bride snatched from your arms, and that is terrible. Our sympathy is with you," and the smile with which he said this ought to have melted a harder heart; but it only awakened a feeling of contempt, for Murray Stanhope was not a man to appreciate anything of the sort.

Still, he was a good hypocrite, and he maintained his character of a sorrowing young widower, sent the message to the newspapers, and then left the house.

His steps were hurried as he made his way downtown, toward the Tenderloin district; but he did not take a cab, preferring to walk until he reached a car, and then riding on one of the slow-moving, but frequent, Broadway cars.

Reaching his destination, Murray Stanhope leaped off, while the car was yet in motion, and walked rapidly to the dingy old building in which he had consigned Nick Carter to a fearful death. Entering it, he was confronted by the Oriental whom Nick had caught tracking him earlier in the day.

"Hello, what do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"Nick Carter is the devil!" was the quiet reply.

"Nick Carter is probably with the devil by now!" Murray Stanhope answered.

"No."

"No! What do you mean?"

"He is gone," the Oriental replied, an unholy gleam coming into his eyes.

With a muttered oath, Murray Stanhope rushed downstairs and through the basement, to the room where the opening to the fan was located. The widened gap in the wall told its own story, and he could only stand and stare for a few minutes, then he roused himself.

"This man has escaped, and is doubly dangerous," he cried. "He must be taken, and made away with. I was a fool to let Jerry influence me. If he is not in our clutches within twenty-four hours, some one else will go where he belongs, understand?" he thundered to the several men who gathered about him, toughs of the worst description, men who had long ago forgotten ways of decency, and the ten commandments, and that the law was a power to respect, and not to violate.

They all showed by their faces that they appreciated the force of his argument, and nodded vigorously when he asked if they understood.

"All right, then, see that you make a thorough search for this enemy of ours. He has made a lot of you do time; he is after me, too. We'll put an end to his career, and put his friends in mourning," which piece of pleasantry was received with shouts of laughter, although, in their hearts, they all despised the man for ordering them to do what he had failed to accomplish.

"Now remember," Murray Stanhope gave his final warning, "it's you or him, for I'll have revenge on you if you are not successful," and, with that, he went to the rooms above, and amused himself with a game or two with the dealer, experimenting with various combinations, and further training his wonderfully keen eyes, while his criminal slaves scattered, each one bent upon carrying out the terrible orders he had given.

It was just about this time that Nick Carter, struggling with the weakness attendant upon his experience with the fan, was finishing his instructions to his assistants, by means of which he hoped to bring the true criminal to justice, and avenge the death of poor Estelle Gardner.

CHAPTER VII.

A MAN OF IRON.

The morning following the day filled with so many incidents, Nick Carter lay, propped up in bed, reading the morning paper, and trying to be patient, for he longed to get up and attend to matters personally.

Chick and Patsy had been very busy, but had accomplished nothing which bore directly upon the case. They had followed Murray Stanhope to the fan-tan rooms, and, disguised as Chinese, had played with him; but, as far as they could see, he had not cheated.

They had discovered a good many little things about him, but nothing which would go to prove that he was the man who smothered poor Estelle Gardner, or to explain his connection with Grace Payton.

There was another thing which, so far, Nick had been unable to discover, and that was a motive for the crime. As he was to marry the girl at Christmas, why did he murder her not three months before the date set for the wedding?

Nick was thinking of all this as he half-heartedly read the paper, when his eyes fell upon this announcement:

"Died, October 24, Estelle Stanhope, beloved wife of Murray Stanhope, and daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus Gardner."

"Estelle Stanhope!" Nick cried, pressing his electric button with more energy than he would have deemed possible.

Joseph answered the bell immediately.

"Get me all the morning papers, Joseph," Nick commanded; and Joseph obeyed, although he wanted to remonstrate, for he had been given strict orders by the physician.

Eagerly Nick ran through them, and found in one what he was looking for, the announcement of the marriage of Estelle Gardner to Murray Stanhope.

Having found it, Nick lay back, his eyes closed, his brain busy making his deductions.

"She was his wife; then he is her heir, and will come into all this money," he muttered. "Still, he would have it, eventually, and all that her father and mother possess, without committing murder."

Nick was seeking the motive.

"Why did he marry her secretly, as he did, and where does Grace Payton come in?" he reasoned. Suddenly all was clear to him, and he brought his right hand down with a crash upon the bed.

"That's it! Grace Payton is his wife, and so he couldn't marry or live with Estelle Gardner, but he and Grace had to get money somehow. Now to prove it!"

Nick had been ordered by his physician to remain in bed for a week, at least; but, as his brain solved the problem, he felt that he could not stay inactive until he proved what he felt to be true, and therefore Joseph was astounded to be addressed by his employer, as he sat in the hall, and, looking up, to see Nick standing before him, fully dressed for the street, although disguised.

"Mr. Carter!" he cried reproachfully.

"I know, Joseph, lad, but something has come up, and I must get out. I'll call you up in an hour or so, and you will know by that I am safe."

"But your injuries, Mr. Carter?" Joseph asked anxiously.

"Joseph, I am a cat," Nick returned gravely, although his eyes twinkled.

"You mean that you have nine lives?"

"Just that."

"Well, you may have nine lives, Mr. Carter, but you ain't a dozen cats, and you'd need be, for you've escaped death more than nine times already."

"Good for you, Joseph. However, never fear. Until my period of usefulness is really over, I will escape. When it is, why, then I'll die, and I think I would prefer to go in harness than any other way," and Nick smiled kindly upon his faithful valet, as he let himself out, and walked down the street.

Of course, he did not feel himself. Every muscle ached, but he was so filled with his discovery that he almost forgot his suffering body, and made very good time to a cable office, where he sent off some cablegrams, and also a dozen or more telegrams. That done, he took an electric cab, and boldly started out for the Gardner house.

Dismissing the cab a block away, he walked to it, and mounted the steps. As the door opened to his ring, he was not surprised to find the hall full of newspaper representatives, for the events of the last two days were of so exciting a nature as to interest not only the yellow journals, but those of a more conservative nature.

The servant told him that Mr. Gardner would see them all in a few minutes, but Nick, slipping a dollar in the man's hands, said, in a very low tone:

"Take this card to him," and then waited.

Within the moment, the man returned, and beckoned Nick to follow him. The detective was taken into a little room, evidently a study, where a quiet-appearing man, with snow-white hair, was sitting, nervously turning over some papers.

"Mr. Carter?" he asked.

Nick bowed.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Carter. I had the pleasure of speaking to one of your assistants yesterday, a very intelligent young man."

"So I have always found him."

"Yes. Now, what can I do for you?"

"Just answer a couple of questions, if you will be that kind?"

"Of course. I suppose they are relative to the unhappy tragedy in our home?"

"They are. I saw the notice of your daughter's marriage in the paper this morning, and I came here to ask you about it."

Mr. Gardner sighed. "So have the men in the hall," he said wearily.

"I come from a different motive."

"I know it."

"So you will have patience with me, I hope."

"I certainly will, Mr. Carter, for I believe you will eventually bring my daughter's murderer to justice."

"Thank you."

"I am only doing you justice, for I realize that the king of detectives is with me, and, when I say that, it is in all good faith."

Nick felt gratified, for he knew Mr. Gardner meant every word he said.

"You want to know something about that marriage?" Mr. Gardner continued.

"Yes."

"What is it that you desire to know?"

"When did it take place?"

"The tenth of July, of this year."

"Where?"

"Grace Episcopal Church, on Broadway."

"Mr. Gardner, when did you first hear of it?"

"Yesterday, when I was told by my nephew Murray Stanhope, who regretted its secrecy as much as I."

"Why did he consent to it?"

"You did not know Estelle, or you would not ask. My daughter was very headstrong, and always did just what suited her fancy."

"What was her motive, do you think?"

"I cannot say. Perhaps the impulse of the moment; then, again, possibly because she was fond of doing out-of-the-way things."

"Then you do not think Mr. Stanhope suggested it to her—you believe that it was her own idea, clear through?"

"It certainly was. No, I do not think he even approved, for he seemed so contrite yesterday, when he mentioned it to me, and I did feel very much annoyed."

"No wonder."

"As you say, no wonder. Such things always stir up gossip, and I detest anything like publicity, and yet we have been before the public since yesterday morning, and are likely to be for some time to come. It is very mortifying and trying."

"Excuse me, Mr. Gardner, but I would like to ask a rather personal question."

"Ask it, Mr. Carter, for I know you have a very good reason."

"I have, Mr. Gardner. Are you greatly attached to Mr. Stanhope?"

Mr. Gardner rose, pushing back his chair, his face showing plainly that he was distressed by the question.

"Is it necessary that I answer?" he finally asked.

"You have answered, Mr. Gardner," Nick replied quietly.

"What have I told you?" asked the perturbed gentleman.

"That your confidence in your nephew has been shaken, and that lately, if it had not been that your daughter was so attached to him, you would have prevented the marriage."

"Mr. Carter!"

"I am right, am I not?"

"Yes," spoken very slowly; "but I did not know that any one could fathom my feelings, for I have tried to conceal them."

"What produced this change?"

"I can scarcely tell. I am something of a theosophist, and I believe very firmly that people are surrounded by an atmosphere of their own. This aura, as it is called, reflects the character of the person, to a great extent, according to my belief. Murray's aura has changed very materially, and I feel it, I see it, whenever we meet. You may not understand."

"I do," Nick replied gravely, "and I believe substantially the same thing, only I do not term it theosophy, but simply what it is. A man cannot be bad, he cannot live a dissipated life, without it changing him. The personality of each human being—the aura, you call it—is very strong, and, of necessity, affects all who come into contact with him."

"Yes, we agree, except that we apply slightly different names," Mr. Gardner assented.

"You have told no one of this change?"

"I tried to tell my daughter, but she would not listen," and he sighed.

"Will you do me a favor?" Nick asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Certainly."

"Do not mention that I have been here, and speak to your servant."

"But they probably have recognized you, Mr. Carter?"

Nick smiled. "Scarcely. I am not wholly myself just now."

"Disguised?"

"Exactly."

Mr. Gardner looked earnestly at the man before him, and then shook his head, saying:

"I can't see any disguise."

"It would scarcely be a disguise, if you could see it, would it, now?"

"Well, no."

"I told your man not to give away my name, and I think he will keep still," Nick continued, knowing that a five-dollar bill will seal the lips of a number of persons.

"I will speak to him. Is there anything more I can tell you?"

"Nothing. Oh, by the way, be sure not to tell either your wife or Mr. Stanhope."

"I will remember your caution, and when may I hope to see you again?" Mr. Gardner asked, rising, as Nick got up.

"When I can point out the murderer of your daughter, and prove his guilt," was the stern answer.

"Will it be soon?"

"I hope so."

"And so do I. Good day, Mr. Carter, and luck go with you," and Mr. Gardner's hand clasp was very warm.

"A fine man," Nick thought, as he left the house.

"A wonderful man, and one I like," Mr. Gardner said to himself, as he summoned his servant, to give him the order relative to holding his tongue about Nick Carter.

As Nick walked along the street, looking for a cab, he met Murray Stanhope, but the latter did not recognize him. Although the detective realized that Murray must know that he had not been killed, he desired to remain in the shadow as much as possible, and so he returned home, and to bed.

"Perhaps I didn't accomplish much," he thought, as he lay back, feeling that delicious relief from pain which accompanies a relaxation of strained muscles. "But I think I did. Poor uncle, I am afraid you're about right. Your nephew has been decidedly out of harmony with your aura. How did such a refined and sensitive man come to marry a woman like Mrs. Gardner, and how he was to be pitied as the father of a girl like Estelle Gardner evidently was."

Nick's thoughts began to wander a little, and in a few minutes he was fast asleep, and thus Chick found him when he came in. Joseph was by his side, whispering about Nick's wonderful exertions, and Chick could scarcely believe the facts.

"Mr. Carter get up and dress?"

"Yes, Mr. Chick, he did, and, what's more, he left the house."

"And you let him?"

"Mr. Chick, what was I to do?" Joseph remonstrated.

Chick sighed. Too often had he come into contact with Nick's wonderful will to really blame Joseph.

"How long did he stay out?"

"Fully two hours."

"Go get the doctor."

"Yes, sir," and Joseph fairly scuttled from the room.

By the time the doctor arrived, however, Nick was sitting up in bed, eating some roast chicken with relish, and declaring that he felt fine and all ready for business."

"What are you made of, Nick Carter?" the physician asked.

"Well-conditioned flesh and blood," Nick laughed.

"I wish I could inoculate some of it into my patients," the physician returned; and then both laughed, and shook hands, and the physician felt as glad as Nick that the effects of the detective's terrible experience seemed to have about passed away, wonderful as it appeared to every one. Probably there are few other persons who could have escaped thus easily.

CHAPTER VIII.

PATSY'S ADVENTURE.

Darkness had enveloped the city, and yet there had come no sign from Patsy. Nick had received answers to a number of his telegrams, and one of them gave the desired information. It read:

"Grace Payton was married, August 26, 1893, to Murray Stanhope, in Chicago, while she was working in a Chinese booth at the World's Fair, and he was attending the Chicago University."

This telegram was from the chief of police of the Chicago force, and, in addition to confirming Nick's shrewd surmise, gave him two bits of information: Grace Payton had been in the Chinese booth on the Midway, and Murray had attended the Chicago University.

"Wonder if Murray learned to play fan-tan then?" Chick mused.

"Probably. I am convinced that, while this man, who is now a criminal of the worst type, had plenty of evil instincts in him, if he had never met Grace Payton, he might have remained negatively good."

"As it is, we have one of the worst of his kind," Chick returned.

"Just that," Nick returned; then added:

"I wonder what is keeping Patsy?"

Well might he wonder, and he would have worried considerably, if he had happened to know everything concerning that daring young detective.

Patsy had been busy all day, but had not landed any useful facts, when, about four o'clock, he went to the fan-tan establishment, and, going into the restaurant connected with the joint, asked for chop-suey.

Now, Patsy liked chop-suey just about as well as he did the man he was tracking down, but he dabbed at it with determination, and tried to make a pretense of eating, while he considered his next move.

At an adjoining table, two women were sitting, but, for the time, Patsy paid no attention to them. Then a word fell upon his ears; it was the name "Grace."

Instantly he was all attention, and the woman who had mentioned it evidently repeated her remark, for she asked:

"Heard anything of Grace lately?"

"Not a thing."

"I wonder where she is?"

"Perhaps with that rich Fifth Avenue family."

"I wonder that her husband lets her work that way."

"Hush, don't you know she is in service with his uncle's family?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who'd have thought it?"

"I never would, the way he used to run after her during World's Fair time."

"He was wild over her, and I don't wonder, for she was lovely then; but the last time I saw her, she had fallen off wonderfully. She had had a boy, and was run down considerable."

"I wonder why he put her with his uncle's family?"

"I don't know; some scheme of hers, you can just bet, for Grace Payton always did scheme, if she could."

"Grace Stanhope, you had better say," the other lady returned, and Patsy set that down on his mental tablets, not knowing that Nick had already discovered this very fact, with date and all.

"Of course, but she will always be Grace Payton to me, because I knew her by that name first."

"To me, too," and then their conversation floated away on other matters.

Patsy poured out another cup of tea. Even if the chop-suey was vile, the tea was excellent, and he wanted to linger as long as possible, but he heard nothing to reward him until, just as the two were leaving, one said:

"I don't think I will look Grace up."

"No, nor will I. I want to forget that all of us worked in the Chinese booth on the Midway."

"Yes, it is better to forget, although we did have some wild old times," and she sighed.

"Best forget them, too," advised her companion, and the other replied:

"Yes, and Grace with them."

Patsy made note of his new bit of information, and then called for another order of tea.

"They'll think I'm an old maid, disguised as a boy," he grinned to himself, and then settled down to piece out what he knew, to compare it with what he suspected, and divide it from what he wanted to know.

Finally he arose, and, paying his check, left the room, and went out into the rather dark hall.

As he came in, he had noticed a door in the rear of this hall, and now resolved to explore back of it. Fortune favored him, for, when he went out, the hall was empty, the door stood slightly ajar, and, looking back, he saw that none of the waiters were within eye range.

Quick as a flash, Patsy crept down the hall, and was on the other side of the door almost before he himself knew it.

"That's not so bad," he thought to himself, and then peered ahead.

"Phew! Opium!" he muttered, as a whiff of air came toward him. "I'm not far from the 'hop' joint, I guess," and, walking noiselessly, he went along the second passage in which he found himself, every sense alert.

The passage made a sharp turn, and he could see nothing, but his outstretched hands came in contact with a baize door. Pushing against it, he came into another dark room, and from thence he made his way into what was evidently a laundry.

A wooden-faced Oriental sat behind a counter, in front of him the little frame on which red, white, and blue beads are strung, by means of which he made his calculations.

"What want?" he asked.

"Pipe," Patsy replied, deciding suddenly to go into the opium joint.

"Pay," he demanded.

"How much?"

The man thrust his hand under the counter, and brought out a little jar.

"Want hop?" he asked.

Patsy nodded, and handed him a silver dollar.

The man scooped out some of the dark gum, wrapped it in a piece of dirty newspaper, and handed it to the lad, but made no motion to give any change.

"Money," Patsy demanded, holding out his hand.

The Oriental grunted, then gave him back fifty cents, and went on staring into vacancy.

"What way?" Patsy asked impatiently.

The man waved his hand toward the opposite side of the room, where hung a very dirty curtain, and, lifting it gingerly, Patsy saw another dark passage, lined with rough pine boards. Walking along this for several minutes, he came into a small room, around which were built rough bunks, one above the other, three tiers high.

Patsy had often been in these dens before, and so knew the ropes thoroughly. Paying no attention to any one, he began looking about him, as though in search of a bunk to suit him. There were perhaps a dozen people there, early as it was, dead to all outward seeming. There is something horrible about the face of a person steeped in opium. The drug seems to steal all the higher attributes, leaving but the baser and more ignoble.

"It's terrible," he thought to himself, with a shudder, as he crawled into one of the bunks, and began preparing his pipe.

The detectives had done too much work in just such places for Patsy not to know exactly how to arrange his pipe so as to appear as though he were inhaling the fumes, and yet to keep away from it.

He had heard a whisper that Murray Stanhope sometimes came to this place, to steady his nerves, and he somehow hoped that he might catch him there.

The boy was right, as he so often is, with that strange intuition of his, for he had scarcely placed himself be-

fore the door swung back, and Murray Stanhope strode in, taking such great steps that no one could have kept up with him. This was a characteristic of his. The man looked worried, and he addressed the Oriental in charge of the room.

"Joy Wing Foo," he said sharply, "I want just a few words to-day. Don't let me take too many, for I must keep my wits about me, but just now I am all up in the air."

Patsy grinned as he saw the man twist and wring his fingers, saw the great form shaking with collapse, for he knew that the end was coming.

"I wondered if he was made of iron," the young detective thought, keeping his keen eyes fixed upon the ashen face, the furtive eyes, the trembling body.

"Hurry!" the man cried, in a high, cracked voice.

The Oriental moved about in his felt slippers, distractingly slow, fixing the pipe for his customer.

"How long?" he asked, as Murray lay down, with a great sigh of relief.

"Not longer than half-an-hour."

"Half-an-hour," repeated the Oriental.

"Yes, call me then," Murray Stanhope returned, catching eagerly at the pipe.

Patsy lay thinking for a few moments, then he raised himself on his elbow.

Joy Wing Foo had left the room. All the others were lost to everything, including honor and respectability.

For years, Patsy had practised throwing his voice, and was an expert in this science. After assuring himself that the road was perfectly clear, he threw his voice so it would appear to come from the ceiling, over Murray Stanhope's head, saying:

"Spare me, Murray, for I love you!"

He had made his voice thin, like a woman's and he had the great satisfaction of seeing Stanhope start nervously, then draw at his pipe all the more vigorously.

"Don't murder me, dear!" Patsy continued. "I love you. Murray Stanhope, you do not dare kill me!"

These words had a terrible effect. Murray Stanhope sprang from his bunk with a loud cry, which brought half-a-dozen Chinese tumbling into the room.

"What is it?" one asked.

"She is here!" moaned the man, burying his head in his hands.

"Who?"

"She, she!" he moaned, throwing out his hands, as though to shield himself.

Just here, Patsy took a long chance, and tried his skill again.

Throwing his voice, he cried:

"I am haunting you, and I will do so as long as you fail to confess. My murdered soul will know no peace until I am avenged!"

Murray fell in a heap to the floor, but the man who had spoken to him, who was the proprietor of the entire establishment, had no belief in supernatural beings. For a minute, he stood motionless, then he raised his head, a satisfied expression on his face.

"Joy Wing Foo," he commanded.

The man addressed stepped forward.

"How long have these men been here?"

"All of them an hour, except a boy, who came in just before him," pointing to Murray.

They were speaking in the Cantonese dialect, but Patsy understood them.

"Where is he?" commanded the proprietor.

"Over there," the man replied, indicating Patsy.

The proprietor strode across the room, and leaned over Patsy.

The boy lay as one in a stupor, and hoped to deceive the crafty eyes, but he forgot one thing. His pipe had not been used. The Oriental looked at him for a minute, then took up Patsy's pipe, giving a grunt as he did so.

Patsy wanted to hit him, but knew it would do no good, so lay quite still, calling himself a good many hard names.

The proprietor stood very still for a moment, then crossing the room again, he laid a yellow hand, with terrible finger-nails, upon Murray's shoulder, saying coldly:

"That talking was done by a boy across the room there; probably he is a detective."

Still shaking with fear, Stanhope staggered to his feet, and strode to Patsy's side. One glance was enough. With an oath, he cried:

"It's Patsy, Nick Carter's assistant!"

The men all looked frightened. Nick Carter's name is one which usually brings terror to the wrong-doer.

"I failed with Nick Carter yesterday, but I won't with his assistant!" snarled Stanhope, and Patsy felt he was in a very tight place.

He peered out, hoping to see a chance for escape, but there was none.

"Trapped!" he thought scornfully, "and just because I played monkey. Nothing is proved by this nonsense, for we knew already that he killed his cousin, and here I am, caught by these Chinks!"

Caught he was, and not only by the Chinks, but by some one more cruel and desperate—Murray Stanhope.

"Wish I was out of this," Patsy thought; then he was addressed by Stanhope.

"Would you mind telling me what made you come in here?" he asked.

"Not in the least," Patsy said cheerfully, sitting up and grinning.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Patsy asked, still grinning, although he was watching for a chance to break through.

"Why did you come in here?"

"Curiosity."

"Do you expect us to believe that?" Stanhope asked sternly.

"I don't know as I do expect anything of you."

Stanhope had a great idea of his own importance, and this light talk brought the angry blood into his face, and he cried passionately:

"Watch out how you jest, young man. Do you know that I nearly finished Nick Carter?"

"Yes, but only nearly, Mr. Stanhope," Patsy replied coldly, "and I don't think a man of your mental size can make way with him or any one belonging to him."

Stanhope turned toward the proprietor.

"He cannot leave here alive," he said.

"Certainly not," was the reply, spoken in good English.

"What shall we do with him?" Stanhope asked.

The two men drew aside to talk, and Patsy, slender, agile, quick as lightning on his feet, thought he saw a chance, and darted toward the door. His hand was on the frame, when they caught him, and brought him heavily to the floor.

"You see he is very dangerous," Stanhope said reproachfully.

"I see," the Oriental returned, looking down at the bright young face.

"Why do you hesitate, then?"

"I am afraid of Nick Carter."

"What do you propose?"

"Starvation," was the reply, and Patsy, in spite of his courage, felt his heart sink.

"Where?"

"In the basement. We have walled up the opening and stopped the fan, and so it is a pretty safe place. We'll just tie his wrists to his ankles, throw him down there gagged, and let him starve."

"And then?"

"Well, we can pitch him into the sewer."

"Why not do that right away?"

"He'd get free some way. Those Carter men have a way of outwitting every one."

"I rather think this one won't get away from what you propose."

"Not this time," laughed the other, and then rough hands laid hold of Patsy, his wrists were secured to his ankles, a gag of dirty rags was placed between his teeth, and he was carried by two of the men down a pair of narrow, steep stairs into a dark cellar, and there thrown upon an earthen floor. With cruel taunts he was left alone, more helpless than Nick had been the day before, and as completely in the dark. If Nick could have seen him, he would have felt justified in worrying very hard for Patsy.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE RACK.

"You had better tell the truth, Wilkins."

"There's nothing for me to tell."

"No?"

"No, there ain't, Mr. Detective Carter, and that's all there is about it."

"Do you think I have forgotten about that fan?" Nick smiled, for it was he talking with Wilkins, coachman to Mr. Gardner, and one of the men who had tried to murder him in the basement of the opium joint.

Chick had arrested him on a warrant sworn out by Nick, who charged him with an attempt to kill. However, Nick used this more to frighten the man, for he hoped to induce him to turn upon his associates.

As Nick spoke of the fan, the man muttered an oath, and his eyes became shifty.

"Now, make a clean breast of it, my man, and we'll see what can be done for you," Nick advised.

"If I peach, will it make it any easier for me?" the man asked.

Nick looked at him a moment.

"Aren't you willing to aid justice to make some atonement?" he asked.

"No, I ain't."

"Well, I promise you that I will help you if I can," and the man knew that Nick's promise meant accomplishment, for Nick was respected as well as feared among criminals.

"All right," growled the man.

"Come, now, and tell me all about it," Nick said quietly.

"What?"

"Why, you know, Murray Stanhope's murder of the woman he married, thereby committing bigamy, for he had been your sister's husband since 1893, August 26."

"How did you know that?"

"I know a good many things," Nick said, with a grim smile.

Suddenly a new idea came to the man. Nick was sitting in his office, almost as well as ever, and yet the day before Wilkins had seen him writhing before the terrific indraw of the automatic fan.

"How did you get away?" he asked, wondering if the detective was human.

"I escaped, that's enough. No matter how I did it," was the terse reply, "just answer my questions."

"What are they?"

"First, did you know of this conspiracy?"

"What conspiracy?"

"Don't mince matters with me," Nick said sternly, "but give plain answers. I mean the conspiracy to delude Miss Gardner into a secret marriage, and, after her death, claim her money?"

"Yes."

"Who originated it?"

The man hesitated.

"Tell the truth. I have plenty of evidence to hold your sister," he said, understanding the man's unwillingness to speak.

"Grace did."

"By herself?"

"Yes."

"Have you a wife?"

"No, I never married."

"Who was the woman who came to the house claiming to be your wife, whom Mrs. Gardner evidently saw?"

"My landlady. We had her come, and I made sure Mrs. Gardner saw her, for I wanted her to believe the telegram sent me when the proper time came."

"But this was in the spring."

"We began to lay our plans early."

"Tell me about the girl's disappearance."

"Well, we made the footman dopey by giving him knockout drops."

"Who gave them?"

"Grace."

"What made her leave home, Miss Gardner, I mean?"

"Stanhope called her up and told her he was tired of the secret marriage. He insisted that she meet him at the depot at five and go with him to Harrisburgh."

"Was she willing?"

"Indeed she was. She had been wanting to confess her marriage for some time, but he had refused."

"Who thought of the excuse of going to the caterer's?"

"She. She told Stanhope she would tell her mother that she was going there."

"Then you drove her to the depot?"

"Yes."

"Did she see any one whom she knew?"

"She had on a long cloak, and her face and hat were hidden by a heavy veil."

"Did Stanhope meet her?"

"No. He had told her to ring him up again at the depot, and, when she did so, he said that he couldn't get off, but that she was to go to Harrisburgh, where Mrs. Wilkins would meet her, and he would join her the next day."

"Was she met by your landlady?"

"Yes, and taken to the place I usually stay when I am in the city."

"It must have cost something."

"No, the woman likes me," Wilkins said, very quietly. "But Stanhope did not go to her, for I find that he was in the city for a week after her disappearance."

"Of course, he didn't. It was intended that he should go after three or four days, but he hung fire."

"Afraid to go?"

"I suppose so, but at last Grace just goaded him on, and so he went on the evening of the twenty-third."

"You had gone on before?"

"Yes, and I telegraphed him to come on, for we didn't want her to die on our hands."

"How had you kept her quiet?"

"Opium."

Nick wheeled about in his chair, and raised the receiver.

As soon as he received the number he wanted, he said abruptly:

"It's I, chief, Nick Carter."

"Yes, I. Oh, fairly well. I expect to hand him over to you by midnight, if not before."

"Yes, chief, I try to. But, chief, what I wanted was to ask you if the doctors had found any trace of opium in the body?"

"They did. Thanks. I'll tell you all about it when I see you."

"All right, chief, all right; glad you're pleased, but the fish is not caught yet."

"What's that? Oh, yes, of course, we usually land him when we know where he is to be found, and have the proper bait. Good-by, again, thanks," and Nick Carter turned from the phone, his ears ringing with the praise bestowed upon him by the chief of police.

"Go on, Wilkins, I believe you said you gave Miss Gardner opium. Why did you keep the poor girl lingering on that way?"

"Simply because that cuss Stanhope was too white-livered to go ahead."

"It ought to be set down to his credit that he felt a little remorse," Nick suggested.

"Credit! What, him? He's mean enough for anything, but he's afraid."

Nick smiled. "It appeared to me the day you thought you had me, that you were the scared one," he said.

"There's a mighty big difference between you and a girl," the criminal said, with a leer.

"Well, go ahead."

"When he came down I gave him the things, the clothes. They were big and baggy, so as to make him look lots broader, for he is so thin; and a beard and mustache, snow-white, to cover his face. There was a wig for his head, and you never saw such a change."

"Why didn't you kill her with the opium?"

"I don't know. Probably it had a good deal to do with it, but I think Grace wanted him to do the act so as to keep a good hold over him. You see Grace is just about the smartest thing in women."

"I am afraid she is," Nick said gravely.

"Well, after he was all fixed up, I took him with me, and we went into her room. She was sleeping just like a child, and I felt like backing out, but he never quivered, but put the pillow over her face and sat on it for at least half-an-hour. He then left the room, and went to dinner. He, the landlady, and I ate together, and then I hustled off to take the train so as to get back to New York."

"Your plans were laid pretty slick."

"Better than you think. Stanhope had been pretending to feel bad for some time, and he had gone to bed and ordered his man not to call him all the next day. He crept out of the house early in the morning of the twenty-third, before it was light, and left New York City. He was back in his rooms by nine o'clock on the morning of the twenty-fourth, and his man is ready to swear that he was not out of the house."

"I know," Nick returned.

"Been asking questions?"

"To be sure."

"I say, Carter," Wilkins protested, "I'm giving you velvet. I ought to get a pretty good thing for all of this."

"I will live up to my promise, nothing more," Nick returned.

"Well, your promise is a good deal," the man admitted.

"Most people think so," Nick pleasantly returned, then asked abruptly:

"Where did Murray Stanhope go after he had shed his disguise?"

"Into the smoker. He had put on another. He had a blond wig, and long, yellow mustache, and he sat there until the city was reached, keeping himself pretty well surrounded with the smoke, and making it unpleasant for the others because he smoked so hard."

"That sister of yours is a very wonderful woman," Nick said, almost sadly. "Pity she has so perverted her naturally brilliant mind. Still, a woman who eats arsenic will do almost anything."

"She don't," the man cried, his face paling.

"She does in starch. It contains arsenic."

The news seemed to affect the man very much, for he sat with his face hidden in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said, at last, quite simply. "Our mother was an arsenic fiend."

"I know," Nick said sympathetically.

"Is there anything you don't know?" Wilkins asked.

"Yes, one thing? What is your real name?"

"Payton."

"I heard of a boy belonging to your sister, where is he?"

"Who, Tony? He's a bright little chap, but running to seed. He's Grace's and Stanhope's kid. He was born the year after they were married. They never had any other children, and I guess it's just as good they didn't," and he sighed.

"Say," Nick cried, suddenly remembering the little fellow for whom he had sent Grace a message, and recognizing the child's face, "does he hang about the Gardner home?"

Wilkins laughed. "There's one time you fell down, Nick Carter. The kid came down to his dad and told that a man had sent Grace a note, and that was the way we happened in on you as you and the housekeeper were talking together."

"How did you get me away?" Nick asked, remembering that this had puzzled him.

"When I put the blanket over your head, and you went off into a trance so easy and nice, we just carried you

out to the stables through the covered driveway, which opens into that very room. Then Stanhope took out the auto, and we went through the streets with you lying beneath our feet. Oh, we know a thing or two, I can tell you."

Nick sighed. It was painful to him to see a man so depraved as to rejoice over his wrong-doing, but he knew that much had been made plain by this man's confession, so he only said:

"As I promised you, I'll remember the information you have given me, although you do not deserve a particle of mercy, you, a man holding a position of trust in a family, to betray your employer as you did; to aid in murdering the only daughter of the house, after you had stood by and seen her degraded by a marriage that was no marriage at all."

Here the man broke in with:

"She just went through the ceremony with him. Grace looked out for that."

"And suppose she did?" Nick cried, thoroughly indignant, "it is nothing to your credit. You never tried to save the poor thing a single pang, but really gloried in your own sister's wickedness. Fah! I believe you are the worst criminal of the lot. Here"—to Joseph, who came in response to a push he had given his button a moment before—"put this man in the strong room, and see that he does not get away."

"Yes, sir," Joseph said promptly, and then the powerful fellow, who is over six feet in height, and broad in proportion, caught the astonished Wilkins up, threw him over his shoulder, and trotted away with him, landing him in a vault, built in the wall of the house, upon which he shut the door, and set the time-lock. This vault was ventilated by a hole a foot square, just below the ceiling, and Nick often found it a good place in which to confine criminals for a few hours.

As the heavy door closed behind him, Wilkins suddenly realized that he was a criminal, held for a serious crime, the worst in the decalogue, and that it would go hard with him. Then he remembered Nick Carter's promise, and was comforted, for he felt sure that Nick would keep it, even though he did not believe him worthy of any mercy; and Wilkins had to confess, as he crouched there on the floor in the dark, that he did not merit any consideration.

All unknown to Nick Carter, far away, in that same city, poor Patsy was lying upon the ground, bound hand and foot, unable to cry aloud, in a cellar filled with vermin, and shut away from any human help. If he had known, he would not have seated himself so quietly to his evening meal, with Chick. Once or twice he did say:

"I wonder what is keeping Patsy," but Chick had said soothingly:

"Patsy is all right. Probably he's on some good thing, and don't want to leave."

"Very probably, but I'd like to see him before we set out."

"Here, too," Chick returned, and then they talked of other subjects.

As soon as they had finished, the two detectives went up-stairs, and began disguising themselves so as to pass muster as Chinese among those of that race. In so doing, and going among these desperate people, they knew they were taking their lives in their hands, but they did that every day, and so never gave the matter second thought.

When their work was done, they looked their part so perfectly, that they knew they would not be detected, and, therefore, set out, it now being nearly eleven. In the meanwhile, Nick had ordered Joseph to give Wilkins something to eat and drink, and he himself had gone to the man, standing out of the light so as not to be seen in his disguise, and told him that he was going after Stanhope.

"Remember your promise," cried the now-frightened man.

"I will remember," Nick replied, and Wilkins hugged this assurance to his heart.

Leaving the house, Nick and Chick took a cab to Mott Street, and then abandoned it, Nick saying to Chick as they walked along toward their destination:

"I wonder if we will see my skilful shadower there to-night?"

CHAPTER X.

CAUGHT AT LAST.

Imagine a low, dirty room, smelling of opium and unwashed humanity. The evening was chilly outside, but in the fan-tan room, the atmosphere was stifling, and, when they first entered, both Nick and Chick nearly choked.

They took their seats about the table, their faces as wooden as those of the others, and watched with beady eyes the dealer as he gravely pushed a pile of the glass beads to the center of the table, and covered it.

Like their associates, the two detectives placed bets. Fan-tan is probably the worst gambling game known, for chance, and chance alone is with the player. The bets can be made in various ways, and numerous combinations can be thought out. The dealer draws out the beads from under the cover in groups of four, and places them on the table. A bet can be made as to the number of groups the pile contains; as to whether the number will be odd or even; as to the number finally left, less than four; if the number will be odd or even. Again, the player may bet that there will be a certain number of groups, and that the number left will be odd, or he can make any other combination his fertile brain suggests.

Although he had often seen the game before, Chick was interested, and what seemed wonderful to him was the keen eyes of the players. They knew to a certainty if they had lost or won before the dealer made a movement to draw forth the groups. Chick's own eyes were very sharp, but they had been specially trained. Both he and Nick were phenomenally sharp about detecting trifles, but they were easily outclassed by these Mongolians, who played with as little emotion as they had witnessed a performance in the Chinese theater connected with the place. Utterly unmoved, they had sat on the hard benches, painted a dirty reddish-brown, and smoking their cigarettes, listened to the outpourings of several characters, their knowledge of the language and clothing enabling them to distinguish between the represented sexes. No women ever act in a Chinese theater. Some of the men whiten their faces, and take female parts, but as they are not good at imitation, their men voices produce a queer effect upon the English part of their audience, for white people often attend, out of curiosity, of course.

For nearly an hour the two detectives sat about the table, waiting, and, in the meanwhile, losing money with perfect stolidity.

Just as the clock struck twelve, the door opened, and

the man they were looking for came in, his shoulders drooping, his hands shaking.

Wearily he threw himself into a chair, and leaned his head on his hand.

The dealer addressed him in French, and Stanhope, without looking up, replied in the same language:

"I am very tired. I'm all broken up."

"Will we go on as usual?" the dealer asked, still speaking in French.

"Oh, yes, if you choose," the man answered, turning, and beginning to place his bets.

Nick and Chick were very alert just now. It was wonderful what eyes that man had, if he were playing fair. He outclassed the men around him very easily.

Nick's eyes left him, and turned toward the dealer. He noticed that his hand was laid upon the table in a peculiar position. The next game it was lying there, seemingly in a careless position, and yet it was different, and the third time it was still different.

Chick had been looking, too, and he had noticed the same thing. Without waiting any longer, Nick said in admirable Cantonese:

"Friends, these men are cheating," pointing from Stanhope to the dealer.

Both Nick and Chick had heard awful sounds before, but never anything to equal the low, fearsome growl of rage which came from the dozen or more throats of those who had lost.

"It's a lie," Stanhope cried, also speaking in Cantonese. "It is not," Nick returned, and in a few words he told of his discovery.

Twenty-four skinny hands, with their terrible nails, were uplifted; twelve wolfish faces, seared and lined, were turned toward the two criminals, then Stanhope made a dash for liberty.

Knowing the place thoroughly, and forgetting that he had been told that the opening for the automatic fan had been closed, he made a dash for the opposite wall, where there was a door leading to the cellars. Once down there, he thought he could escape through this hole, as Nick Carter had, the day before.

Nick was prepared for just such a thing, and he sprang after him, with Chick a close second.

The man reached the door, and tore it open. Nick was right at his heels, and, as he stumbled down the steps, the detective followed, while Chick only stopped long enough to shoot the bolt, to keep the enraged gamesters on the other side.

Stanhope heard the detectives behind him, but tore ahead, hoping to outwit and outdistance them.

Patsy, lying almost unconscious in one of the rooms, heard the noise, and recognized the footsteps of his friends. His ears were too well trained to be mistaken, and yet what agony it was to lie there and not be able to make them hear.

Stanhope dashed into the room, Nick remembered, with a shudder.

A howl of rage escaped him as he saw the newly plastered wall, and knew that there was no escape for him this way.

Nick laid his hand upon the man's shoulder, and said quietly:

"Murray Stanhope, you had better give up."

"Who are you?" the man asked, trying to tear loose; but, in spite of his experience of the day before, the grip of the Little Giant's fingers was like steel.

"Who do you think?" Nick asked quietly.

Murray Stanhope looked despairingly at the two faces, seen in the dim light of the basement, the outer rooms of which were lighted with several electric lights.

"I don't know you," he said finally.

"What's that?" Nick asked.

Chick listened.

Faint, and yet distinct, it came again. It was the danger-signal belonging to them alone.

"Patsy's here somewhere!" Nick cried, losing his hold of Stanhope in his astonishment. "Find him!"

Stanhope fell back.

"Nick Carter!" he gasped.

"Yes, Nick Carter," Nick returned, again clutching his arm, but the man had recovered some of his vigor, and Nick was not himself in strength; and so Stanhope wrenched away, and might have escaped, if he had not tried to revenge himself. Judging that Nick had not the strength to resist him, he made a dash at Carter, his head held low, but he forgot that Nick was past master in the art of self-defense.

Nick simply stepped aside, and allowed the heavy man to rush on until his head struck the wall with considerable force. The shock stunned him, and he fell heavily, half unconscious, to the floor. Nick lost no time, but snapped on irons about both wrists, and rose just in time to grasp Patsy by both hands; Patsy, who hobbled, so numb were his legs; Patsy, whose mouth was torn and swollen, but who could cry:

"Oh, Nick, didn't I make the signal dandy?"

"How did you do it?" Nick cried.

"I just threw myself up in the air, and came down on the floor with a thump, that's how. Oh, a man can do a lot when he thinks he's being left," and Patsy gave a very poor attempt at a grin, for he could not be serious, especially where his own feelings were concerned.

When Nick and Chick opened the door leading to the fan-tan room, they found it deserted. The others had decided that murder would result, and, not wanting to mix themselves up in the matter, had fled.

Before morning, the police had cleaned out the whole establishment, and the man who had played Nick false was one of those arrested.

Nick gave him a look when he saw him, and simply asked:

"Think it paid?"

"The devil had me," the Oriental answered, and perhaps he was right.

The chief welcomed Nick, Chick, and Patsy when they delivered their prisoners, the two men and the woman, for they had arrested Grace Stanhope.

Nick had gone on alone to do that, and had summoned Mr. Gardner.

"Are you successful?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"Who killed my poor girl?"

"Have you not some idea, Mr. Gardner?" Nick asked, hoping that the kindly gentleman would be, in a measure, prepared.

"Then I was right? His aura has changed?"

"Very materially."

"My dear wife's nephew. This is a very cruel blow," the father said gently, and he looked very much older.

"I knew it would be."

"Did you suspect him when you were here before?"

"I knew he was guilty, but I lacked a few proofs."

"I see. Is there anything remaining?"

"Just to run over details with you, and then to arrest the accomplice," and Nick gave Mr. Gardner the particulars.

He was touched, but Nick could see that he was not, after all, as much astounded as he might have otherwise been, had not his refined and sensitive nature already warned and, in a measure, prepared him.

It was a very easy matter to arrest Grace, and she made no resistance when she learned that her husband had been captured.

"Do you want to tell me anything, or to ask any favor?" Nick asked gently.

"No."

"Don't you want your son looked after?"

"Let him see after himself," she replied brutally.

Nick's heart hardened toward her, and he was very glad to turn her over to the chief of police.

"You have cleared this up without loss of time, Nick," the chief said cordially.

"Yes, and yet it was a pretty dense case when I took hold."

"It was that," the chief replied, leaning back in his chair; and looking at Nick with satisfaction written all over his pleasant face.

Nick was woefully tired, and ready to go home. So was the chief, who had waited for Nick to deliver the goods.

Suddenly the chief asked:

"How does the hair match, Nick?"

"Perfectly, chief, and the place shows where it was pulled out."

Chick looked interested, as he asked:

"How did she pull out the hair, if she was killed in her sleep?"

"Her hand worked automatically. It was purely muscular, and yet, while dying, unconscious as she was, the poor woman marked her murderer, and gave me my first clue."

All this time, Grace had been sitting close to her husband. She had not been ironed, for Nick always spared a woman that indignity, when he could, and, as she had come so quietly, there seemed to be no need for that precaution; but in this case the great detective found that it was not wise to allow himself to show too much mercy.

Nick's words had scarcely left his mouth, when there was a terrible commotion. Nick, Chick, and the chief were almost blinded by a cloud of pulverized starch which Grace Stanhope threw in their faces; then Nick sprang forward, and caught Murray Stanhope's coat, just as he was vanishing.

The desperate man turned, and brought his heavy fist down upon Nick's half-blinded face with a sickening crash. Chick and the chief had sprung forward, but Nick was ready, and he returned Stanhope's blow with one which felled the tall man like an ox; and then the detectives, brushing the starch out of their eyes, bent over him.

"His irons are filed through!" Chick cried, amazed.

"Quick, Chick, look for her!" Nick cried, feeling sure that this handsome, and yet crafty, criminal had escaped. He was correct in his surmise. While they were talking, she had managed—just how, none of them exactly knew—to free Stanhope's hands, and then threw the starch in their faces.

"She's a wonderful woman, and one who will cause us trouble again, I am afraid," Nick said, with a sigh.

"I am afraid that she will, but we have this fellow and Wilkins," the chief said, with satisfaction.

"And will have her before she gets through her career," Nick added quietly.

His prophecy was speedily fulfilled, for, inside of thirty hours, he found Grace Stanhope, though the desperate woman, finding herself in the toils, escaped the vengeance of the law by means of the terrible carbolic-acid route to eternity.

Stanhope paid the penalty for his misdeeds, and the crime of the sleeping-car was thus, from the standpoint of the law, amply avenged.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 475, will be "The Mystery of an Untold Crime; or, Nick Carter's Marvelous Skill." Out next week.

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